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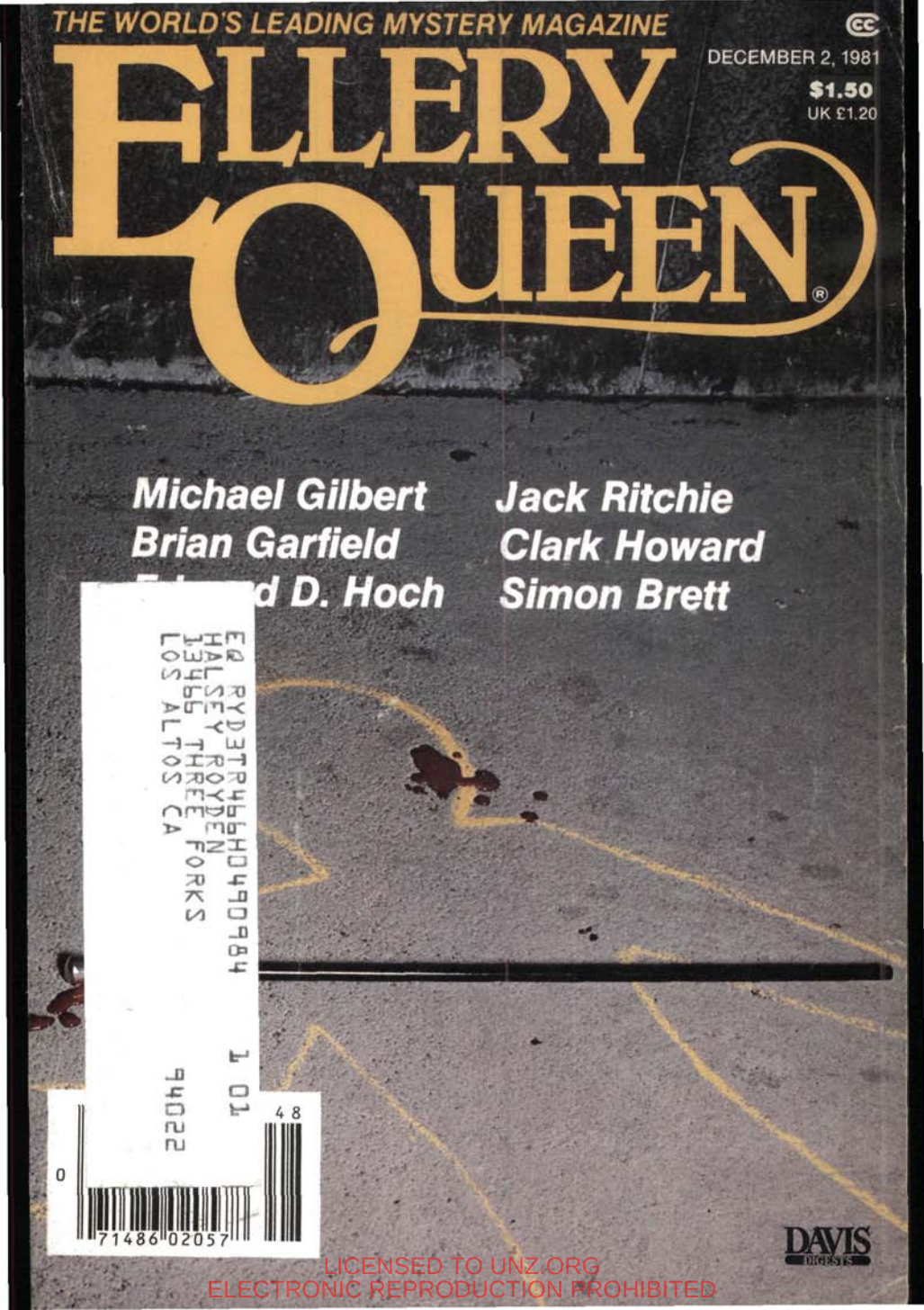

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a *NEW* Calder and Behrens story by

MICHAEL GILBERT

Can you imagine a fictional world of espionage and counterespionage, of agents and counteragents, in which Mr. Calder and Mr. Behrens have retired? Retired? Calder and Behrens? Perish the thought! And yet that is what Calder and Behrens are considering—which, if it happens, would make this their last assignment. (No, Mr. Gilbert, you cannot let it happen!)

As to this assignment, my managing editor, Eleanor Sullivan, read the manuscript of "The Last Reunion" ahead of your Editor. Her comment consisted of one word: Wonderful!!!!! (with five exclamation points). We echo that judgment, but add!! (two more exclamation points) for good and true measure . . .

THE LAST REUNION

by MICHAEL GILBERT

A sharp, clear July morning had turned to a drizzle of rain, and Mr. Calder and Mr. Behrens had retreated, with Rasselas, to the sitting room of Mr. Calder's cottage. They had brought out the chessboard, but so little was Mr. Calder's mind on the game that, within ten minutes of the start, he had allowed Mr. Behrens to maneuver himself into a position of impregnable advantage.

He said, "I am thinking of resigning."

"You can't think about resigning," said Mr. Behrens. "Either you do resign, or you don't."

"I'm not talking about chess," said Mr. Calder crossly. "I'm talking about our work."

"Why?"

It was fifteen years since both men had left the regular Intelli-

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gence Service, almost on the same day. Since then they had been on a retainer. If a job seemed to be suitable for their particular talents they had been assigned to it.

"Enough is enough," said Mr. Calder. "I'm getting old. My reactions are slowing down. Rasselas is as bad as I am."

The great dog looked up.

"Yesterday a rabbit ran rings round him."

Rasselas seemed to understand this. His expression indicated that he thought the criticism unjust. Rabbits? Who cares about rabbits? He could have caught it quite easily if he had wanted to.

"It's odd you should mention it," said Mr. Behrens. "Because the same thought had occurred to me. I fired a refresher course on the police range at Croydon last month and barely qualified. If you've made your mind up, we'd better get in touch with Fortescue."

As he said that, the telephone rang.

"And that," said Mr. Calder, "is probably more trouble."

His telephone number was not only ex-directory, unlisted, it was changed every six months. He went out into the passage where the telephone was. Rasselas followed him.

Mr. Behrens fiddled with the chesspieces, trying one or two moves to see whether the attack he had mounted could be circumvented. He had decided that the position was irreversible when Mr. Calder came back.

"Your instinct was correct," he said. "That was Fortescue."

"And he has a job for us?"

"Yes and no. That wasn't the main point. He rang up to tell us that he was resigning his post at the Bank. Did you realize that he would be seventy next month.?"

"I never thought about it. He could be any age."

"That being so, he has decided that it's time he gave up his other jobs too."

"He's the sort of man who'll live to ninety. What is he going to do for the next twenty years?"

"He plans to grow roses."

"He always was a stickler for tradition."

The two men sat for a minute, staring out at the rain, which was drifting across the top of the North Downs in a filmy curtain. What they had heard had underlined their own decision. They had enjoyed working for Mr. Fortescue, a man of intransigent realism who could be ruthless to his subordinates, but allowed no one else, from the Prime Minister downward, to interfere with them.

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"I suppose it will be Rowlandson who takes over."

"I suppose so," said Mr. Calder. Since they were going themselves, the matter was unimportant. "He's all right. A bit Royal Navy."

Mr. Behrens remembered something. "You said, 'Yes *and* no.' Is there something in the offing?"

"There is a job. It sounds rather unusual. I said we'd go up tomorrow and discuss it."

"With liberty to say 'No' if we didn't like the sound of it. I'd hate to get nailed at the fifty-ninth minute of the eleventh hour."

"It didn't sound like that sort of job," said Mr. Calder. "In fact, it doesn't sound like our normal sort of job at all."

"For the last forty-eight hours," said Mr. Fortescue, "the Department has had possession of Rudolf Sperrle's testament. Nearly five hundred pages of typescript. In that folder there."

He indicated a fat box-type folder on his desk.

Mr. Calder and Mr. Behrens looked at each other in astonishment.

"Rudolf Sperrle?" said Mr. Calder. "Hitler's personal aide-de-camp? I'd no idea he was still alive."

"He isn't," said Mr. Fortescue. "He's been living in retirement in Bonn for the last thirty years. After the decision was made not to prosecute him—and, indeed, there was nothing to prosecute him for—he slipped into obscurity. I've no doubt he was only too glad to forget his wartime experiences, and glad that other people should forget them, too. But there was a drawback. Obscurity declined into poverty, and poverty to near starvation. He was too well-known for any of the new industrialists to risk giving him a job. He had a minimum state pension and made a little money by doing other people's typing."

"There must have been times when he regretted the high old days at Berchtesgarten," said Mr. Behrens. "He was very close to the center."

"He was at the center. True, he took no part in decision making, but he heard the decisions being made. He accompanied Hitler everywhere. No one was jealous of him, because he exercised no influence. An admirable position for a Boswell."

"And now he has written the 'Life of Johnson'."

"It is not exactly a biography of Hitler. Rather a commentary on his command methods. Why he took certain decisions, and how he achieved his ends. You might call it the sequel to *Mein Kampf*. It is a document which will be of incalculable value to historians. To

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psychologists, too, no doubt. When I had read it I came to two conclusions. The first was that it must be returned to the German government. It belongs to them, not to us. The second was that I would have it photographed, which I have done. Both copies are in that file."

"How on earth did we get it?"

"For that we have to thank the foresight and patience of John Corrie, our representative at the Bonn Embassy. After the near debacle over the Bartz affair I persuaded them to create the office of Assistant Trade Secretary as cover for one of our men. Corrie was my nomination. He proved an excellent choice. One of the things he did was to keep in discreet touch with Sperrle. In spite of the ridiculous stringency of our Intelligence budget we were able to help him with money, from time to time.

"But it was more than money. It was sympathy. Corrie used to call on Sperrle in his tiny rooftop apartment up in the Leopoldstrasse and drink coffee with him, and gossip about old times. About a fortnight ago, when he called on him, he saw quite clearly that Sperrle was dying. That was when he handed over the typescript. According to Corrie, Sperrle said, very solemnly, "I make this gift in the trust that no evil use will be made of it, and in the hope that our two great Anglo-Saxon nations will never again be in enmity."

"Not a bad epitaph," said Mr. Behrens.

Mr. Calder, more practically, said, "You mentioned a job."

"I want you, first of all, to read the last chapter. Sperrle, you will recall, was in the Bunker during the closing weeks of the war. Along with Goebbels and Martin Borman, he was one of the witnesses at the macabre wedding of Hitler and Eva Braun. It was then that Hitler gave him this last assignment. Read it for yourselves. One of you can use the original, and one the photocopy."

For half an hour there was silence in Mr. Fortescue's dignified Victorian office where Millais' "The Angel Child," on one side of the chocolate-colored porcelain overmantel, smiled at Landseer's "Tug of War" on the other. At the end of it Mr. Calder said, "Jesus," an expression of feeling which drew a frown from Mr. Fortescue. "I mean, what an extraordinary story."

Rudolph Sperrle, making his way through the sector of the ruined city which was still held by the Germans, had reached the appointed rendezvous where a battered staff car awaited him. He was carrying with him two sealed and padlocked canisters, a harness having been fixed to them so that he could carry one over each shoulder. They

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were very heavy. The staff car had taken him south, through the narrowing gap between the Allied advance on one side and the Russians on the other. Its objective had been the Austrian Alps, in the heart of which Hitler had planned his mountain fortress, a fortress which was half built and never manned. The unexpectedly fast progress of the Americans in the south had driven Sperrle eastward. Petrol and oil were difficult to get, and the car was on its last legs.

It had finally crawled into Straffelager Seven. It was clear that it could not go much farther. There were reports that the Eighth Army, moving up from Italy, was already in Austria.

Straffelager Seven was a camp for British who had attempted to escape from the regular camps or had made nuisances of themselves to their captors in some way. It was the noncommissioned equivalent of Colditz—not a castle, but a quadrilateral of barbed wire at the foot of the Bohmerwald near the village of Abendreuth. To the Commandant of the camp, but to no one else, Sperrle had confided the details of his mission. He had been entrusted with a large collection of letters, records, and memoranda in the Fuhrer's own hand, photographs, and personal mementoes, and a number of actual messages which had been recorded, on the somewhat primitive apparatus of the time, in the form of wire spools. "When the great German nation rises again, as it will," Hitler had said to Sperrle, "these relics will be of the Ark of the Covenant. They must never, never, *never* come into the hands of our enemies."

(As Mr. Behrens read the words he could hear the Fuhrer's voice rising, as he had heard it once before, in a terrifying crescendo. Never, never, *never.*)

Sperrle and the Commandant had discussed the matter late into that night and all through the next day, to the accompaniment, growing menacingly closer, of the Russian guns in the east. On the second night, taking only the camp adjutant into their confidence, they had buried the canisters in a bed of concrete under the floor of the Commandant's own office.

"Okay," said Mr. Calder. "So we go and dig it up."

"With German cooperation. Yes."

"It doesn't seem a very difficult assignment."

"The difficulty," said Mr. Fortescue, "is that nobody now knows exactly where S.L. Seven was. Corrie will explain it all to you. I've arranged for you to meet him at Munich Central Station at eleven o'clock, two days from now. You'll need a little time to get ready."

Mr. Calder and Mr. Behrens, who had grown used to being ordered

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to remote parts of the world at a moment's notice, looked at each other in some surprise.

"I should have explained," said Mr. Fortescue blandly, "that you will need to take camping equipment. Sleeping bags and—ah—groundsheets, and that sort of thing."

This he said with all the relish of a man who had a comfortable bed of his own to return to.

"It's like this," said John Corrie, as they drove north and east from Munich in Mr. Calder's roomy Ford Escort, packed with camping gear. "S.L. Seven was a temporary affair. It was run up in a hurry at the end of 1944 when the camps in Poland had to be evacuated. The usual prison-camp style. A double barbed-wire apron, a watch tower at each corner, wooden huts for the prisoners, and something a bit more permanent for the Commandant and the guards, who were second line S.S. It was a naughty boys' camp, and the guards were fairly tough, but there don't seem to have been any particular atrocities."

"I expect it was too close to the end of the war," said Mr. Behrens. "Most Germans had their chins on their shoulders by the end of 1944."

"Could be," said Corrie. "Anyway, it was the Russians who got there first. The Commandant and the adjutant stuck to their posts. Much good it did them. They were taken off to Russia, and I've no doubt were put straight underground. The S.S. boys scarpered. The prisoners marched out after them, in a rather more orderly fashion, made for the American lines and were repatriated. Sperrle got away into Austria. S.L. Seven ceased to exist."

"But surely," said Mr. Calder, "*someone* must know where it was."

"When we get there, you'll understand the difficulties better. The Russians drew back a little at this point, for some reason, and the Iron Curtain runs about three miles east of Abendreuth, which was deserted by its few aged inhabitants and is now a ghost village. All the useful roads in that area ran east-west, and since the Iron Curtain chopped them off, there was no point in keeping them up. The nearest place of any size is Plattling thirty miles away on the Passau-Nurnberg road. Its got quite a decent gasthaus, incidentally. I've booked rooms for us there tonight and we're meeting our opposite numbers, Police Captain Bruckner and Lieutenant Brunz, there tomorrow morning."

Mr. Behrens had been considering the curious problem of the

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vanishing prison camp. He said, "What about farmers? Someone must use the land."

"It's open heath. There are two farms. One of them is about ten miles west of Abendreuth. The other, twelve miles northwest. The owners share the grazing rights, such as they are. Their horses and bullocks have the run of the heath. They round them up twice a year, in spring and autumn. Like Dartmoor ponies. They're pretty wild specimens, I believe."

"Wasn't there some sort of road from the village to the camp?"

"I thought of that," said Corrie. "But a lot of marram grass and heather grows in nearly forty years. When I tried to trace it, I was reminded of that poem of Kipling's. Do you remember it? The one about the old lost road through the woods: *'It is underneath the coppice and heath and the thin anemones.'* Only in this case it isn't thin anemones. It's a particularly vicious sort of dwarf thornbush. Discouraging to exploration on hands and knees."

Captain Bruckner and Lieutenant Brunz arrived at Plattling punctually at nine o'clock on the following morning, each in his own car, with a police driver. They set out in convoy, with Bruckner leading. The mist of early morning had cleared away, and there was promise of a fine day.

Ten miles out of Plattling the road they were on deteriorated into something not much better than a farm track. It crossed the open heath in a series of small dips and rises. Ahead of them the line of the Bohmerwald rose, blue and gray under the morning sun.

When they arrived at their destination Mr. Calder was surprised to see that a sizable encampment was already springing up. There was a large transporter, from which its crew was unstripping two big porta-cabins, ready-made wooden one-room buildings. The work was in charge of a police sergeant. Other men were setting up tents, and unloading posts and barbed wire. There were two caravans, and an old-fashioned field cooker. A modern gypsy encampment, thought Mr. Behrens.

The sergeant approached Captain Bruckner, saluted, and said, "Has any decision been made as to where the huts shall be placed?"

Bruckner said, "Find the best hard standing you can, and dump them there for the moment."

Mr. Calder had been making a calculation. The huts would each, he guessed, house at least ten men. The tents and caravans would take twice as many. Yet, counting the drivers of the vehicles and

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the unloading team, who were all policemen, he made the total no more than fifteen.

"We seem to be allowing ourselves plenty of elbow room," he said.

Captain Bruckner smiled at John Corrie, who pointed back the way they had come.

"Reinforcements," he said.

Two large army trucks were approaching them up the track from Plattling. They too had police drivers, beside each of which a civilian was sitting. As the trucks came to a halt the civilians jumped down, went round to the back, and said, "All out, chaps."

"Thank God for that," said a voice from the back. "It's nearly forty years since I've traveled in the back of one of these trucks, and I'd forgotten how bloody uncomfortable it was."

"Not like your air-conditioned Cadillac, Philip," said a second voice.

"You can keep your Cadillacs. Give me a good old English Humber every time."

In front of Mr. Calder's astonished eyes there emerged from the back of the lorries a dozen civilians, all of late middle-age, and all dressed in the sort of clothes that a businessman likes to wear on holiday. One had evidently been a fisherman. There was an assortment of flies in his tweed hat. Another might have been a yachtsman. A third had simply put on the clothes he would have worn for a little light gardening.

Corrie evidently knew the fisherman.

He said, "Come along, Sam. Meet two friends of mine."

Introductions were effected all round. Mr. Behrens recognized the fisherman. He had been, until his retirement, the Managing Director of a company which ran a famous chain of food stores.

Corrie, said, "We advertised for ex-inmates of SL7 who had a little time on their hands and might enjoy an open-air holiday, at the joint expense of the German and British governments. I thought we might have some difficulty in finding anyone. I was never more surprised in my life. Applications flowed in. We had to close the list."

"We're a picked bunch," said the man called Sam with a grin.

"You've got a lot of ground to cover," said Corrie. "You'd better spend the rest of the day getting organized. I've got to get back to Bonn." And to Mr. Calder, before he left, he said, "Don't forget. This is really a German show. We're helping them. Bruckner's in charge.

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He's a decent fellow. I'm sure you'll all get along splendidly. There'll be a daily shuttle to Plattling, so you can keep me in the picture."

For the next three days the weather remained fine, which was a blessing because they made no progress at all. One of the difficulties was that the prisoners had not been allowed into the village, which was out of sight of the camp, and their estimates of its distance and exact direction from the camp varied widely. It was agreed that it had been to the east, and more than a mile away, but that was all they could agree about. For long hours each day they prodded with poles in the thick heather and undergrowth and found nothing but a few nose-caps from Russian shells and an unexploded mortar bomb which they buried cautiously.

There were excitements of another kind. On the second day a Russian helicopter had floated across and looked at them. A herd of wild-haired bullocks watched their efforts with equal, or even greater suspicion. Finally, deciding that the time had come to assert themselves, the bullocks had charged. One of the policemen drew his police carbine and shot the leading animal dead at point-blank range. The herd withdrew. That evening the diggers had enjoyed an excellent meal of steak and chops.

Not that they were short of food. The German commissariat had produced sound if unimaginative supplies. As soon as Sam had examined them, he sent a message back, through Plattling, to the German associates of his old firm. They must have moved fast, because on the next afternoon a truck arrived loaded with delicacies. One of the policemen turned out to have been a cook before he joined the police force.

"I haven't eaten like this for years," said a man named Lester.

"That's because you haven't taken so much exercise for years," said Sam.

Philip said, "He showed a nice turn of speed when that bullock came after him."

During those long days in the sun and cheerful evenings in Hut A (into which they had moved after their personal tent had been trampled on by a wild horse), Mr. Calder and Mr. Behrens came to know and appreciate the ex-inmates of Straffelager Seven. All of them were men who had made their very different ways in the world since 1945.

Chester was a Member of Parliament for a Northern constituency. Albert, who had ended the war as one of the youngest Sergeant Majors in the Brigade of Guards, had become a policeman in Kenya

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and then headed his own Security firm in London. Philip had worked his way up in a publishing firm from reader to Managing Director. Ronald had made a name for himself in horror films; he gave them a memorable impression one evening of Dracula at large in a nunnery.

It was on the fourth day that Alan, the yachtsman, made an observation.

He said, "We've been looking in the wrong place."

This had been said so often that nobody took much notice. But Alan seemed to have something definite in mind.

He said, "None of you chaps are sailors, so none of you notice the really important things, like the sun and the moon and the stars. Now I've remembered one thing quite clearly. In the last few weeks before the Russians came and let us out, I used to watch the sun going down *exactly* behind the top of the Grosse Arber."

He pointed to the jagged top of the peak, nearly five thousand feet up and the highest point in the Bohmerwald.

"I took a bearing at the time. You remember those little pocket button compasses we had in our escape kits. Ninety-three, twelve magnetic. I remember that because I had a great-aunt of ninety-three and she had twelve Persian cats."

"All dead, I suppose, now," said Lester.

"Pipe down, Lester," said Sam. "I believe Alan's got something."

"I've had to make a few adjustments," said Alan, ignoring the interruption and producing a compass from his pocket. "Never travel without a compass by the way. We're nearly five weeks later now. And Magnetic North doesn't stand still either. But I can give you a back-bearing from that peak—I took it at sundown last night when you chaps were soaking up the gin—and I'll guarantee it's correct to thirty minutes either way."

"So what do we do with it?" asked Philip.

"We peg it out. You take one pole, Albert, and walk towards the peak. I'll give you 'move right' and 'move left' signals. Then we do the same thing in the other direction. That gives us the line. Then we move along it, searching not more than twenty yards either side of it."

Under the sailor's directions a line was laid out. It was nearly a quarter of a mile south of anything they had searched so far.

"I always told you we were looking in the wrong place," said Chester.

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"What you actually told us was that we were too far *south,*" said Philip.

"Have a heart," said Ronald. "He's a politician. You must allow him to change his mind once every twenty-four hours."

It was Ronald who struck paydirt. He let out a scream which would have done credit to a maiden attacked by a werewolf. The others crowded round to see what he had found.

It was a slab of concrete, roughly eighteen inches square. When the moss had been scraped away they could see that there was a square hole in the center of the slab, and a few rotting fragments of wood in the hole.

"There you are," said Alan complacently. "Trust the British Navy. That was one of the four supports of a corner tower."

The others were already scraping in the earth.

In a few minutes they had located and cleared a neat square, composed of four concrete blocks. The excitement had attracted everyone to the spot.

"We can't tell which corner tower it was," said Alan, "but it won't take long to find out now."

By dusk that evening the perimeter of the camp had been established and staked out. Two lines of barbed wire had been run round, and the huts, tents, and caravans all moved inside. This was a sensible precaution, as the bullocks were getting aggressive again.

"What I suggest we do," said Mr. Calder, "is reconstitute, as closely as we can, what the camp looked like. I'm told there were six huts for the prisoners. Right? So let's put our two huts down in the places occupied by two of them. If someone will be kind enough to indicate exactly where that was."

This led to a complicated argument, which was finally settled by Philip. He said, "I was in the hut nearest the wire, and I know *exactly* how far it was from the wire because two of us worked it out—by trigonometry, we didn't dare pace it—when we were planning a break. It was thirty-six feet six inches from the southwest corner of the hut."

"Which you remember," said Ronald, "because you had an aunt aged thirty-six who had six budgerigars."

One of the huts was transported by the carrier and positioned thirty-six feet, six inches from the wire, with the other hut parallel to it, and fifteen feet closer to the entrance. The presumed position of the other four huts, the administrative block, and the Commandant's Office was then worked out with reasonable accuracy. The

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large double marquee was pitched over the latter. Smaller tents and caravans represented the guard huts and camp kitchens.

By the time this had been done it was dark, and they knocked off for supper. A crate of Bollinger was opened and they celebrated their progress.

Later that night the inmates of hut A discussed the excitements of the day.

"It's uncanny," said Chester. "As we were walking to the hut I looked round, and suddenly I seemed to be back. The barbed wire, the guard tent, the huts, and then—that."

One of the policemen had brought a record player. On the other nights they had gone to sleep to the sound of mixed pop and classical music. Now he had produced—possibly saved up for the occasion—the record of German songs sung in the lovely husky contralto of Marlene Dietrich.

Underneath the lamplight, on the barrack square—

The words and the tune of "Lili Marlene" floated out into the night, carrying with it, to a handful of middle-aged and elderly gentlemen on the brink of sleep, a reminder of a time when they were young, and life was not a dusty path to look back on, but a long bright road stretching ahead of them.

"Do you wish you could put the clock back?" said Philip.

"Yes," said Sam and Alan simultaneously.

"Certainly not," said Albert.

"Not on your life," said Ronald.

"That gives me a casting vote," said Chester sleepily. "But I can't tell you, because I'm damned if I know."

Back in their own tent Mr. Calder and Mr. Behrens were thinking about the present, not the past.

"I don't want to alarm our nostalgic friends," said Mr. Behrens, "but I fancy we've reached a point where we may have to take a few sensible precautions."

"Were you thinking of the Russians?"

"You mean that helicopter? No, I wasn't particularly worried about the Russians. I've no doubt that everything we've been doing has been photographed by them and examined and debated, but I don't see that they have any reason to interfere."

"So?"

"So I've remembered something which I find a little alarming. That manuscript that Fortescue gave us to read. You wouldn't have

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noticed it, of course, because you only had a photocopy. I had the so-called original. Only it wasn't the original. It was a carbon copy."

Mr. Calder thought about this for a minute in silence. Then he said, "And you think that the top copy, the original copy, might have got into other hands."

"I can think of one set of people," said Mr. Behrens, "who'd give their front teeth or their back teeth—and since a lot of them are getting on in years, their false teeth, too—to get their hands on what's in those canisters."

Mr. Calder thought about it. He said, "Did you bring a gun with you?"

"I didn't, because it didn't seem to be that sort of party."

"Nor did I," said Mr. Calder sadly.

Next morning they found that the search was by no means over. Rudolf Sperrle's story had been specific, up to a point. With the whole night to work in, the three men had dug a hole in the earth under the Commandant's private room, had put the canisters into it, and covered them with liquid cement. Then they had piled back the earth on top and restored the surface.

"It would have been more helpful," said Captain Bruckner, "if he had told us the depth of the hole."

"And even more helpful," said Lester, "if we hadn't all been such good boys. I mean, if old Barney was here he'd have given us the layout of the block. He spent more time in cells than out of them. I don't think any of us ever set foot inside the place."

The possible area was not enormous, but when the only method of search was to drive a series of spikes into the packed earth, going at least five feet down on each occasion, it was bound to be laborious.

At the end of a hard day's work, as they were sitting down, a bit dispirited, to their evening meal, Sam suddenly said, "What you're all forgetting is that you're looking for the Commandant's office."

When the insults which this remark provoked had died down, Sam went on, "I was a sort of commandant myself. When we moved the organization out of London and opened a new complex at Slough, I was consulted about where my own office was to be. I said, put it as far away from other people as possible, and give it as much sun as you can. Okay? Apply that here. He'd want to be at the far side of the block, which also happens to be the south side. Maximum peace. Maximum light. So I say, stop messing about here. Start on the south, and work inwards."

Captain Bruckner had listened seriously to the argument. He said,

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"I agree that would be logical. The first rooms inside the entrance would be the offices. Then the stores and the armory, and the cells for offenders. The Commandant's private quarters would be at the far end. We will start there tomorrow."

"Why not this evening?" said Philip. "I wouldn't mind putting in a little overtime, to find out whether Sam's talking nonsense or not."

This seemed to meet with general approval.

"We'll make it a mass assault," said Lester. "Let's all line up along the southern edge and work our way inwards."

The tables were cleared, everyone was armed with some sort of implement, and they set to work. Even the policemen, who seemed infected by the prevailing excitement, joined in.

Half an hour later, just at the moment when enthusiasm was beginning to flag, Philip said, "Hold it, chaps, I think this miner forty-niner has struck paydirt."

He was prodding with the iron bar which he held. He said, "It feels quite different. Not nearly so packed. Quite loose."

He drove the point in again.

"And there is something there. I just hit it. See that? Fetch a spade."

The others crowded round him and the earth flew out. Soon they could hear the edge of the spade scraping a rough surface.

At this exciting moment Mr. Calder happened to be outside. He had walked across to look for extra spades in the guard tent. The moon was full and was bathing the camp and the heath in a theatrical wash of yellow limelight. As he strolled toward the entrance, he met Hans, one of the youngest and solidest of the policemen, coming back.

Hans said, "I did not know, Herr Calder, that we were expecting visitors."

Mr. Calder said, "What visitors?"

"In cars. I heard them just now. They stopped a little distance away, down the track. I wondered—"

He had no time to say any more. Mr. Calder had grabbed him by the arm, jerked him to one side, and pulled him down onto his face in the shadow of the guard tent.

Men were advancing, spread out in line, across the open space between the entrance of the camp and the marquee. Mr. Calder counted fifteen of them as they went past, the nearest almost treading on Mr. Calder's fingers. He could see that they were all carrying automatic weapons.

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As soon as they were past, Mr. Calder started to wriggle backward, keeping in the shadows and as flat as possible on the ground. Hans came with him. When they were behind the tent Mr. Calder said, his mouth close to Hans's ear. "Get into the tent. Squeeze in under the canvas. See if you can find me one of those field telephones."

Hans nodded, and wormed his way into the tent. Five minutes passed before he reappeared, pushing the instrument in front of him. Meanwhile Mr. Calder had been making a reconnaissance. The ground was uneven and he led the way, still keeping flat, down a shallow depression, under the wire and out of the camp. After this they continued their advance on hands and knees until a clump of bushes hid them. By this time they were nearly a hundred yards from the camp. Mr. Calder noted that Hans had not opened his mouth. It confirmed his good opinion of the boy.

Mr. Calder said, "Now we must find the telephone line. I think it was laid on the left-hand side of the track."

They found it without difficulty. Mr. Calder said, "You know how to use this thing?"

Hans nodded. He was already baring the insulation with his jackknife and twisting in the wires from the terminals. Then he put on the headset and spoke softly into it. Softly, but to no purpose. He said, "The line is dead."

"I was afraid of that," said Mr. Calder. "But we had to try it first. They will have cut out a section of the wire. It might take all night to find it. We'll have to go for the cars. You heard them arrive. How far down the track?"

"Two hundred meters I would judge."

There were three bulky Steyr touring cars and a smaller Volkswagen parked in a line. As they came up they could see the man who had been left to guard them. He was sitting in the front seat of the leading car, and he was smoking.

"No time for finesse," said Mr. Calder. He stalked up to the car and shouted in German, "That's no way to stand guard, you lazy lout."

As the man scrambled out Mr. Calder hit him scientifically and he went down flat on his face.

"Take his boots off," he said. "We'll use the laces to tie him up. And gag him with his scarf."

"Then we take the little car, yes?"

"Yes," said Mr. Calder. "But we don't start it up here. It's much too close to the camp. We'll have to push it."

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They turned the light Volkswagen without much difficulty, pushed it up the track for ten yards, and then had the benefit of a short downhill run. Ahead of them the track rose steadily for about a hundred yards to a crest. After that, as he knew, they would have a free run down for about the same distance.

Mr. Calder thought about it. They were now about three hundred yards from the camp. The night was very still. With any luck they would not have been missed. What they needed to do was to complete their getaway as inconspicuously as possible.

"We shall have to push the car over that next crest," he said. "We'll set the wheels as straight as we can and both get behind her. And we won't try to do it all at once. I'm not as young as I was."

Mr. Calder soon realized one thing. Hans was the right man for this job. Mr. Calder himself had surprising reserves of strength in his barrel chest and thick arms, but Hans was twice as strong as he was.

It would have been easier if the surface of the track had been harder and smoother. After forty yards Mr. Calder demanded a breather. The sweat was pouring down his body inside his shirt.

He said, "Did you ever play rugby football?"

"Rugby football," said Hans. "I have watched it. It seemed a very rough game."

"You'd be an asset to any team in the second row of the scrum."

"Those are the ones who put their heads between the bottoms of the other ones and push?"

"That's right."

The thought seemed to amuse Hans. He said, "Perhaps I will try it."

Then they resumed their labor. Mr. Calder thought with sympathy of Sisyphus. By the time they reached the second halt, some twenty yards from the crest, something seemed to be troubling Hans. He said, "Have you considered, Herr Calder, that the keys of the car are missing. How shall we start it?"

"You don't need keys to start a car. Just a small piece of wire."

"Is that so? That would be the way in which a car thief would operate?"

"Certainly. I've stolen a lot of cars in my time."

"So?" said Hans. Clearly his opinion of Mr. Calder was now very high.

At the top of the rise the passage of vehicles in either direction had thrown up a low ridge of packed earth.

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"We'll have to move that," said Mr. Calder. "There should be a tool kit of sorts in the back."

Armed with a jack handle and a large spanner they started to dig away the obstruction.

The men in the tent were taken totally by surprise. The first they knew of the irruption of fifteen armed men into the marquee was when a hard voice said, in German, "You are advised to make no rash or stupid moves"; and repeated this in English.

Everyone swung round.

Captain Bruckner said, "Who are you? You have no right here. Put down those arms at once."

When the newcomers made no move to obey him, Lieutenant Brunz, who was the only man armed at that moment, put his hand onto the gun in his hip holster. The man who had spoken raised his own weapon, a machine pistol, and shot the Lieutenant through the shoulder.

"You see," he said, "we mean business. We do not shoot to kill, unless we have to. But a bullet in the shoulder or the knee can be painful. It can also cripple you. If anyone wishes to try whether I mean what I say, he is at liberty to make the experiment."

The men had spread themselves along the far side of the tent and were covering every angle of it.

Mr. Behrens stepped forward slowly. He said, "You will all do exactly what this man tells you. There is a first-aid box in the corner. Albert, would you get it, and see what you can do for the Lieutenant." Brunz was sitting on one of the chairs by the table. His left hand was clasping his right shoulder and his face was contorted.

The leader of the newcomers was looking curiously at Mr. Behrens. He said, "I think I know you. But I have forgotten your name."

"I have not forgotten yours," said Mr. Behrens. "You are—or you were—Obersturmfuhrer Otto Lessner. You were, for a time, in charge of the guard at Ravensbruck Camp. I did my best to get you hanged. I am only sorry that I was unsuccessful."

Lessner came forward and peered into Mr. Behrens' face. He was smiling. It was not an agreeable smile, more a lifting of the lips.

"Behrens, of course," he said. "This is indeed a reunion. Where is your inseparable friend, Calder?"

"He died two years ago, otherwise I'm sure he would have been happy to be here. It would have given him great pleasure to see you in such an uncomfortable position."

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"Uncomfortable, Herr Behrens?"

"Certainly. You have shot and wounded a police officer in the presence of a number of witnesses. Forty years ago you might have got away with it. Not now, my friend. Not now."

Lessner had taken off his left-hand gauntlet and was holding it loosely in his right hand. Now he swung it, hitting Mr. Behrens in the face.

"Running true to form," said Mr. Behrens. "A bully and a coward." He was speaking in German, loud enough for the newcomers to hear. They were a curious mixture, some of them hardly more than boys, others as old as Lessner, or even older. Mr. Behrens ran a sardonic eye over the representatives of the resurgent Nazi movement. "This is a curious platoon you've brought along, Obersturmfuhrer. Half from the kindergarten and half from the Old Folks Home."

Lessner's face was dark red and his hand was sliding toward the butt of his machine pistol when he stopped.

He said, "I know you, Herr Behrens. I know your ways. You are an old fox. Why do you seek to provoke me? I answer my own question. You are playing for time. You expect assistance. It will not come. We have taken all necessary steps to insure that. Nevertheless, we will waste no time exchanging compliments with you. Maybe when we have finished our work we will have a little sport."

He signaled to two of the young men, who laid down their weapons and stepped forward smartly. Mr. Behrens saw that one of them was carrying a length of wire rope fitted with a shackle. Evidently Lessner had studied Rudolf Sperrle's manuscript and had come prepared.

The rope was passed under the exposed block of cement and fastened. The two men pulled. The block lifted a little, and fell back.

"Two more," said Lessner. The remaining gunmen spread themselves out to maintain their arc of fire. Four men pulling together lifted the block clear of the hole and swung it onto the floor of the tent. Two of them unloosed the rope. The other two went outside and returned with a sledge hammer and a heavy steel chisel.

Well rehearsed, thought Mr. Behrens. He looked down quickly at his watch. Thirty minutes had passed. It might take them another thirty to crack the cement. Not quite long enough.

The men were using the hammer and chisel cautiously. It was more than half an hour before the metal canisters had been broken free of their concrete shell and were standing on the ground.

Mr. Behrens said, "Would it not be of interest to all of us to

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ascertain at least that the recordings of the Fuhrer's voice have survived?"

He noted the stir of interest which this produced from the listening gunmen.

"No doubt it would be interesting," said Lessner, "but unfortunately we have not brought the necessary apparatus with us."

"I have," said Mr. Behrens. He went to the back of the tent, opened a suitcase, and brought out an old-fashioned dictaphone. "The description of the wire spools was detailed enough for me to be able to procure a machine which should enable us to play them. Would you care to try?"

There was no doubt about the sentiments of the audience, German and British alike.

Ninety-nine percent in favor, thought Mr. Behrens.

Lessner hesitated. Then he said, "We have the night in front of us. I see no reason not to humor you in this matter."

The canisters were fastened with stout padlocks which had rusted solid and which, as Mr. Behrens had hoped, took a lot of removing. In the end, the shanks had to be sawn through. The first cylinder contained bundles of papers, tightly packed, each wrapped in oilskin.

"It would seem that what we are looking for must be in the other one," said Mr. Behrens smoothly.

Lessner hesitated again, and glanced down at his watch. He did not overlook the possibility that someone might have escaped and gone for help. But the nearest effective help was nearly fifty kilometers away, and all the camp vehicles had been immobilized.

He smiled thinly, and said, "Very well."

This time they knew what they were about, and less time was wasted. There were packets of papers in the second canister. Under them was a wooden box, the size of a large cigar box.

"Allow me," said Mr. Behrens. He had set up his machine on the table, and now took one of the spools from the box and fitted it into the machine. He tried not to appear hurried, but he was wasting no time, because he had already heard the noise he was hoping for. It was faint as yet. Probably he only picked it up because he was listening for it. The attention of every other person in the tent was on the apparatus on the table.

A voice filled the tent. Harsh, staccato, unmistakable.

"To the people of the great German Reich, your Fuhrer speaks."

Mr. Behrens looked round. The youngsters, newcomers, and police, were attentive. The older men were much more than attentive. They

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were rapt, spellbound. He noted, with sardonic amusement, that Captain Bruckner was holding himself rigidly to attention.

"We stand at one of the turning points of history. The storm clouds are rolling up, from the east and from the west. At this moment the sky overhead looks black."

For God's sake, thought Mr. Behrens, they *must* hear it soon. The three giant Hercules transporters had cut their engines as they came in at two thousand feet.

"But do not fear. Be of good courage. The sun will break through."

At the last moment Lessner realized what was happening. He switched off the recorder and raced to the entrance of the tent. Fifty parachutists were already on the ground. Another hundred were floating gently to earth under the full moon.

"I confess I was surprised that he dared to shoot that policeman," said Mr. Behrens. "He couldn't hope to get away with it. Unless he killed us all and buried us. Which seemed improbable."

"If he had secured the contents of those canisters," said Mr. Fortescue, "he'd have had every chance of getting away with it. I understand, unofficially, that there was enough material there to embarrass two of their High Court judges, a police chief, and a number of very successful industrialists. With material like that he could have bought his way out of trouble easily enough."

"Do you think the authorities will use it?" asked Mr. Behrens.

Mr. Calder said, "You remember what Sperrle said: Put it to no evil use. Forty years is a long time. Let the dead bury the dead."

Mr. Fortescue said, "It is a decision for them, not for us. But I hope that you are right."

"Q"

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a *NEW* short story by

CLARK HOWARD

Let's say you are planning the "party of the season" and you want to really impress your "circle of friends." Let's say you would like to have a "guest of honor," someone "special." Would you choose a gypsy murderer?

SECOND JEOPARDY

by CLARK HOWARD

From the bed, Vivian Hunt threw her husband an irritated glance. "What do you mean you aren't sure you can bring Eger Banska to my party tonight? You know you expect the jury to find him innocent—you've already said so."

"I expect an acquittal, yes," said Harold Hunt, across the room at the dresser. "But that's not the point. The man's been locked up for nine months, held without bail. If he's acquitted this afternoon and allowed to walk out of the courtroom, he may have his own ideas about how he wants to spend his first evening of freedom. Gypsies are peculiar that way."

"Tell him the party's *for* him," Vivian suggested. "Say it's a victory party or something of that sort. I'll hire a Hungarian violinist."

Hunt, watching his wife in the mirror as he knotted his tie, asked, "Why are you so keen on having Eger Banska at your party anyway? I thought you and your set were into racing-car drivers this season."

"Don't be catty, Harold. I just think it would be rather exciting to have a gypsy murderer as a guest."

"Yes, but if the jury acquits him, he won't *be* a murderer."

"That's nonsense and you know it," Vivian replied with a toss of her elegant chin. "Eger Banska is as guilty as sin. You have a certain attitude about you when you're defending a guilty man, Harold. A

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stiffness, almost a pomposity. I first noticed it ten years ago when you defended that awful man who killed only on Sundays."

"Terrible person, yes."

"Then you were the same way when you handled the case of that doctor and his sexy blonde nurse who poisoned the doctor's wife. How you ever got them off still amazes me—"

"True love triumphed."

"You were that way again when you defended the South Side Ripper."

"He was disturbed."

"To say the least. Anyway, you've been the same way since shortly after you took Eger Banska's case. Stiff and pompous. Almost defensive, if you'll pardon the pun. I'm sorry, but I know you too well, Harold. Eger Banska is guilty of murder."

Hunt did not reply. Damn her, he thought. He loathed the way she could read him sometimes. He pretended to be preoccupied with gathering his change and keys from the dresser caddy, and avoided her eyes. But not for long. Vivian got out of bed and went over to her dressing table. She still had the same firm lithe body that had drawn open stares on the beach at Waikiki where they had honeymooned fifteen years earlier. If only she still had the same disposition, he thought wistfully. But no, he immediately corrected himself, that was not fair. It was he who had changed over the years, not Vivian. She was the same spoiled, selfish, vindictive person she had always been.

"Are you going to try and bring Eger Banska to my party or not?" she demanded.

"I'll think about it."

"Really, Harold, I don't see how you can refuse to do *anything* for me," she said, glaring at him in her vanity mirror.

Here it comes, Hunt thought resignedly. "Are you going to remind me again how much your family has done for me, Vivian? I'll remind you, if you like." He turned and faced her. "Your family financed my law-school education. Your family helped support us while I was getting my degree. Your family set me up in practice. Your family—"

"—made you everything you are today, Harold," she finished the sentence for him.

"Wrong!" he said with ice in his voice. "*I* made me what I am today. *My* talent, *my* mind, *my* skills. Your family furnished the money for me to acquire those skills, but that money has long since

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been repaid. Every dollar we got from your father *and* your Aunt Edna. With *interest!"*

"You needn't become hostile," she purred.

Hunt put on his coat and snapped the lapels flat. "I am *not* hostile, Vivian. I'm simply weary of insinuations that without your family's support I'd be bagging groceries in a supermarket. And I'm weary of your attitude that because I accepted their help I am now indentured to your least little whim." He stood behind her and caught her glance in the mirror. "Have you given any thought to my frequent suggestions that we divorce?"

"I have not," she answered, turning to face him directly. Her own expression hardened now—eyes, mouth, jaw. And her voice took on a coldness that matched his. "I haven't—and I won't. We are going to stay married, Harold, for better or for worse, just the way we promised. We made a vow, Harold."

"That's ridiculous. Neither of us is happy. We haven't been since—" He let his words drop into silence.

"Since *what?"* Vivian demanded, her voice a challenge. "Go on, say it! We haven't been happy since I killed Leslie. That's what you were about to say! Admit it!"

"I was about to say since we lost Leslie."

Leslie had been their only child. When she was seven, Vivian had picked her up at ballet school after playing bridge and drinking vodka gimlets all afternoon. On the way home a fox had dashed in front of her car from the woods that surrounded their suburban home. Vivian swerved to miss it and lost control of the car. She had always scorned seat belts because she said they wrinkled her clothes, so she never insisted that Leslie use them either. When the car hit a tree at the side of the road that day, little Leslie, wearing no seat belt, was thrown through the windshield. Vivian suffered only superficial injuries.

"You've always thought it was my fault," Vivian complained.

"Well?" Harold said pointedly. "How often did I tell you to make the child use a seat belt? How often did I implore you not to drink in the afternoons when you had to use the car? How often—"

"All right, all right, all right!" she screamed. In a flash she was away from her dressing table and over at the portable bar they had in one corner of the bedroom suite. With trembling hands she poured several ounces of brandy and drank it like water. Harold stared at her for a moment, then shook his head in frustration and left.

Harold was halfway to the city when his car telephone buzzed. He

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smiled, thinking it would be Evelyn. On nights when he did not see her, she always called him on his way to the office. "Hello, darling," he answered.

"It isn't 'darling,' " Vivian said, "it's your wife. I just want to tell you two things, Harold. First, if you ever go ahead with a divorce, I'll countersue so quick your signature won't be dry. And I'll drag your 'darling' in as a co-respondent. After the things I'll accuse her of, people will think she's a hooker instead of a lady lawyer. Do you read me, counselor?"

"Loud and clear," Harold said, tight-lipped. "What's the second thing you want to say?"

"Bring Eger Banska to my party tonight or I'll tell every guest there how I know he's guilty. I'll even say you *admitted* he was guilty. How do you think that will sound?"

"Not very good." Harold watched his knuckles whiten on the hand holding the steering wheel.

"The party's at eight," Vivian said. "If that jury comes in today, you and your client be there."

"I'll do my best."

"You'd better." Vivian's words were like a slap in the face. She hung up.

Harold's knuckles remained white all the way to the city.

Harold spent an hour at his office, going through the morning mail his secretary brought in, and reading over a brief prepared by his law clerk in a breach-of-contract case he was handling. Then he had his secretary call the clerk in Superior Court where the Eger Banska case had been tried. The jury had been brought over from its hotel at nine and was still sequestered. But, as the judge had been advised the previous day, they were close to unanimity and expected a verdict within hours.

"I'm going over to the Hall of Justice," Harold told his secretary. "I'll be in Deputy District Attorney Murphy's office if the court should call."

Leaving the office, his briefcase in one hand, Harold walked up First Street toward the Civic Center. It was a pleasant morning—clean cool air, freshly hosed sidewalks, the stores on First not yet crowded with shoppers. Normally Harold would have been walking with a vigorous spring to his step, square-shouldered and perfectly postured; but after the scene with Vivian, and then the phone call in

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the car, he trudged along in an uneven gait with a slump-shouldered carriage heavy with worry.

How had his marriage fallen to such a sad state? Where had all the love and care and desire gone? Was Vivian right?—did he blame her for Leslie's death, really *blame* her, really feel that her overindulgence in drink and her rejection of the use of seat belts amounted to culpability instead of mere carelessness? Was that why, over the years, they had drifted apart?

Was that why Vivian had sought refuge among her society friends and allowed herself to become consumed with inane parties given for bullfighters one season, poets the next, social revolutionaries after that, with racing-car drivers the current rage? Was that why he had plunged more and more deeply into his practice, allowing his work to overshadow all other interests, until the day he met Evelyn and fell so quickly in love with her? Was the reason for all that the fact that he subconsciously felt that Vivian had killed little Leslie—not accidentally but in a criminally negligent manner?

By the time he got to the Civic Center, thinking about his situation had caused Harold's brow to pinch at the top of his nose and given him a headache. He stopped at the cigar stand in the lobby of the Hall of Justice, bought a tin of aspirin, and took two of them at a nearby drinking fountain. Then he rode the elevator to four, where the district attorney's staff of deputies and investigators had its offices. He walked down the hall to a door lettered: *E. V. MURPHY, DEPUTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY*. Knocking briefly, he entered.

"Hello, Murphy," he said.

"Hello, Hunt."

Evelyn Virginia Murphy came around the desk and into his waiting arms.

"I tried to call you in the car this morning," she said. "The line was busy."

"Vivian called after I left the house. She wanted to tell me that if I tried to divorce her, she'd ruin us both."

"Maybe I ought to find a new boy friend," Evelyn said, kissing him.

"Maybe you ought to," he replied. They kissed again.

"To hell with the divorce," she said. "Just leave Vivian and we'll live in delicious sin. Everybody's doing it."

"Everybody's doing it because no one is making an issue of it. Vivian *would* make an issue of it. She'd raise so much hell that the

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bar association would call us both up on morals charges just to shut her up."

"Can they do that? In this day and age?"

"Sure they can. It's one of those things like spitting on the sidewalk: it's never enforced but it's always there."

"Damn."

"My sentiments exactly."

Evelyn returned to her desk and Harold sat down across from her.

"Harold," she said in a somewhat measured tone, "do you believe in abortion?"

"I'm not sure I either believe or disbelieve in it. Why?"

"I'm pregnant, that's why."

"Oh." His mouth fell open in surprise. He shook his head briefly, as if clearing it. When it rains, he thought. "I take it by your question that you don't want to have a baby."

"I don't want to have an *illegitimate* baby, Harold. At heart, the lady lawyer is an old-fashioned girl."

"Of course. I guess I'd have known that if I'd given it any thought."

"I was being glib a moment ago when I said to hell with the divorce. There's nothing I want more than for us to get married and have this child. Do you think Vivian is completely inflexible about *letting you go*?"

"Yes."

"Would it make any difference if you told her about the baby?"

"No, that would make her even more determined. She couldn't stand the thought of you giving me a child after she took one away from me."

Evelyn looked down at her desk and sighed. "There doesn't seem to be any solution then, does there?"

"Not at first glance. But give me a little time to think about it."

"All right. But I can't give you much, you understand. I don't want to wait too long if—well—"

"I know."

Evelyn's phone rang then and she answered it. After a brief conversation she hung up and said, "That was your office. The jury is ready in the Banska case."

Riding down in the elevator, Hunt ran into Carl Foster, the deputy district attorney who had prosecuted the Eger Banska case.

"Hello, Harold," he said. "Looks like we've got a verdict."

"Hello, Carl. Yes, looks like."

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They walked side by side across the plaza that lay between the Hall of Justice and the Criminal Courts Building.

"What do you think it's going to be?" Foster asked.

"Not guilty," said Harold. "You?"

"Not guilty," Foster agreed. "Off the record, what do you think it *should* be?"

"Guilty," Harold admitted.

"Right. Why in the hell couldn't I prove it?"

"There was a lot of circumstantial evidence, Carl. Stuff the jury could go either way on. Don't fault yourself."

"Damn it, Harold, that man is a murderer! A young girl ridiculed his prowess as a lover and he strangled her with a scarf. I don't care how much of the evidence was circumstantial, he belongs in prison."

"Yes, he does," Harold said, "but *only* if what he did can be proved."

Carl Foster shook his head disgustedly. "The system," he said emphatically, "is rotten."

"Granted. But it's still the best in the world."

They started up the steps of the Criminal Courts Building. Carl Foster glanced curiously at Hunt. "Why do you do it, Harold?" he asked without rancor. "Why do you defend people like Banska?"

"That's easy," Harold replied. "To guarantee that you and I get the same chance if *we're* ever accused of something."

Carl Foster said nothing further.

The two lawyers walked into the courtroom together, walked shoulder to shoulder down the aisle. parted just inside the railing, and took seats at opposite counsel tables facing the bench. The court clerk and bailiff were already at their places. There were several newspaper reporters in the press row. About half of the spectator section was full.

Shortly after Harold sat down, a jail guard brought Eger Banska in from the holding cell behind the courtroom. He was a man of thirty, darkly handsome, with a head of thick, curly black hair and round sensuous lips. By vocation he was a fortuneteller in a Hungarian restaurant; by avocation he was a womanizer for pleasure or profit, as the situation dictated. His eyes, if one looked closely, were as cold and mean as winter.

"How does it look?" Banska asked Harold as he sat down next to him.

"You'll be a free man in a few minutes," Harold said casually.

"How can you be so sure?" Banska asked.

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"Trust me, this is my business. Incidentally, would you like to come to a party my wife is giving tonight?"

"You are that sure, eh? This party, will there be many women there?"

Harold thought of Vivian and all her society friends. "Yes, quite a variety." He did not tell Banska that he was being invited as an object of curiosity. "You'll come, then?"

"Yeah, sure," Eger Banska said. "If you're sure I'll be able to."

"You will," Harold assured him.

As if his words were a cue, no sooner had Harold spoken than the court was called to order, the judge entered, and the clerk was instructed to bring in the jury. Nine women and three men filed into the jury box, and the forelady, in answer to the judge's question, confirmed that the jury had, indeed, reached a decision. She handed the clerk the completed verdict form, and the clerk read it aloud.

"In the case of the People versus Eger Banska we, the jury, impaneled and sworn in the above entitled cause, do, upon our oaths, collectively and unanimously, find, to the charge of murder, that the defendant is not guilty."

Harold looked over at Carl Foster. The prosecutor shrugged helplessly and looked away. Harold offered his hand to Eger Banska.

"Congratulations. You're a free man. It'll take a few hours to process you out of jail and get your personal things returned. I'll pick you up there later and we'll go to that party."

Carl Foster was leaving at the same time that Harold left and they fell in together in the hall.

"Some day," the deputy district attorney said ominously, "you're going to regret helping to turn men like Banska loose."

Vivian Hunt's party broke up around one o'clock in the morning. It was one of the most successful parties she had ever given—mainly because of the presence of the notorious gypsy Eger Banska, whom everybody *knew* was a murderer despite his acquittal. As they departed, everyone in Vivian's circle of friends expected the party to be raved about for months to come. It was *the* party of the season. Some of Vivian's friends went home feeling cheated because their husbands were brokers or bankers instead of exciting defense attorneys who could muster such guests as Eger Banska.

When the last guest had left, an elated Vivian went up to bed. Harold helped Eger Banska, by then very drunk, to one of the guest

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rooms and poured him onto the bed. He removed the gypsy's shoes and dropped them to the floor.

The caterers were still cleaning up when Harold returned downstairs. He waited until they had finished and let them out. Then he mixed himself a nightcap and sat in front of the television in the library.

At quarter to two Harold went back upstairs.

At two he came down again. He stretched out on the couch and stared at the library ceiling until three. Then he made the phone calls.

Evelyn, who was a light sleeper, answered on the second ring.

"Listen carefully," Harold said. "I won't be seeing you for a while. A few weeks. But everything is going to be all right. Don't worry about having the baby—it will be legitimate."

The second call was to the police. "This is Harold Hunt on Montclare Road. There's been a murder here."

His last call was to Carl Foster. "You were right when you said that some day I'd regret helping turn men like Eger Banska loose. The police are on their way over here right now. Banska has killed Vivian. Strangled her with a scarf just as he did the other victim."

"I'll come right over," the deputy district attorney said.

It was after dawn when the Scientific Investigation people finished their photographing and measuring and putting evidence in plastic zip-lock envelopes, and the coroner's people got Vivian's body into a bag and took it away. It looked like an airtight case. She had been strangled naked in her own bed with one of her own silk scarves. One of Banska's shoes was found in the room. Banska, in a state of undress, was found in a guest room, passed out. Naturally, he remembered nothing.

"He won't get away with it this time," Carl Foster vowed. "We've got him cold now. I'm just sorry, Harold, that—well—"

"I know," Harold said. "Thank you, Carl."

Eger Banska was brought down in handcuffs. "I would like to speak with Mr. Hunt in private," he said.

Carl Foster and Harold looked at each other. Foster shrugged. "If you want to, Harold."

Banska was sat in a corner, two policemen standing just far enough away not to be able to hear. Harold went over to him.

"You are very clever, Mr. Hunt," the gypsy said. "Clever enough

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to save me from one murder charge, clever enough to have me arrested on another."

Harold shrugged. "If you're convicted this time, you'll be even, since you were guilty last time."

"No, Mr. Hunt, you are mistaken: I was no more guilty last time than I am this time. You have framed an innocent man."

Harold's eyes narrowed. "You're lying."

"To what end? For what gain? Neither lies nor the truth will save me now, as you well know. But I *am* innocent, Mr. Hunt."

Carl Foster walked over. "Time to go downtown, Banska," he said, motioning the two policemen over.

As Banska was being led out, he turned to Harold with a final word. "Gypsies can confer curses, Mr. Hunt, as long as the curse is just and serves what is right. I confer one now. Innocent blood for innocent blood. I confer a curse on your unborn child."

As they took Eger Banska away, Harold stared after him, frowning. He thought of Evelyn and the baby she was carrying.

What nonsense, he decided, forcing a weak smile. There was no such thing as a gypsy curse.

Then his frown deepened.

But how did Eger Banska know Harold *had* an unborn child?

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

HOT PLOT

by RILEY HUGHES

A ski mask seemed a neat disguise;
He'd rob the bank clothed to the eyes!
One scarcely needs to question why
He failed; he did so in July!

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a *NEW* detective story by

BRIAN GARFIELD

Ned Marks had paid his debt to society, and the insurance company had made good the bank's loss. Now it was up to private investigator Thurston to get back the stolen $700,000 in negotiable bonds . . .

THE SHOPPING LIST

by BRIAN GARFIELD

t was awkward. She wouldn't tell him the truth, obviously, but she'd always had trouble lying.

He phoned, as she'd known he would, on Tuesday afternoon. "I'll be out of town on business until Friday. Not sure what time I'll get back—don't count on me for Friday dinner. But I'll get tickets for that play Saturday night—"

Marie closed her eyes. "Oh, Severn, I'm sorry. I just can't make it Saturday."

There was a moment's silence but then his deep reassuring voice rumbled down the line: "Sunday, then. I'll get tickets."

"Sunday's fine." She closed her eyes in relief. He really was marvelous. He took her on faith—no questions, no protestations. She said softly into the phone, "I don't know if I can wait that long to see you. I do love you, darling—and I'm sorry about Saturday."

"See you Sunday then. Around six, so we can have dinner first. Love you, honey." Then he was gone and she cradled the phone, but her hand remained on it as if to prolong the thread of contact.

After a while she bestirred herself. She went through the apartment to the foyer and rummaged in her handbag for the list.

The handbag was on the sconce below the oval mirror and she examined her reflection briefly and wondered what Severn could

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possibly see in her: plump plain Marie, dark brown hair she never could do anything with, creases here and there that presaged the looming fortieth birthday—not a whole lot to draw the attraction of a man like Severn. He was thirty-five and successful; he'd been divorced for several years. When she'd asked him why on earth he wanted to keep seeing her, he'd only said, "You're comfortable, love. I've had my fill of abrasive ambitious women."

His ex-wife, she'd gathered, was a beautiful but brittle careerist—some sort of talent agent or casting director; Marie wasn't sure—Severn rarely talked about her. "It wasn't really a marriage. We both backed into it, trying to get out of things."

Marie looked away. At first, after her mother had died and she'd moved into this apartment, she'd meant to take down the mirror from the foyer wall—she didn't like mirrors; they only reminded her of her unattractiveness. But occasionally Aunt Leah and Uncle Arthur would come around to dinner or one of the office girls would give her a lift home and stay for a drink—mainly, Marie thought, because most of the office girls lived out in the Valley or down in Orange County and it was easier to have a drink at Marie's while the Freeway traffic thinned out before driving home—and guests always liked to have a mirror by the front door so they could make sure their faces were on before they ventured out onto the Beverly Hills sidewalks.

She found the list in her handbag and studied it. She never remembered to do things unless she wrote them down. Severn kidded her about it.

She'd miss him desperately in his absence for the next few days; but in a way she was grateful for it. She'd be able to get everything done and she wouldn't have to tell lies to Severn to explain why she was going to be out so much this week.

A few of the items had already been checked off—she'd taken care of them ten days ago during Severn's last business trip out of town; but there was still a great deal to do.

1. *Toy gun. Must look real. Revolver type.*
2. *Suitcases (2).*
3. *Clothes. Ned's suit size 44 short. Shirts 16 neck, 33 sleeve. Waist 38, inseam 29. Shoes 10½-C. Socks, shorts, etc. Remember Ned prefers brown, doesn't like blue.*
4. *Car. Can be old but must run well.*
5. *Make airline reservation: San Diego to Mexico City for late Monday afternoon Feb. 18th, in name of Arnold Creber.*

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7. *Sunglasses. Reflector Type.*
8. *Blond wig, man's. Ned's hat size is 7¼.*
9. *Ned arrives LAX Feb. 16th, 7:30 p.m. Take suitcases, etc. Leave envelope at Delta information desk.*
10. *Make reservation in Creber name at a Burbank motel, Feb. 16th & 17th.*

She'd taken care of all the easy things on the list and left the difficult ones for last. Tomorrow on the lunch hour she'd take care of the toy gun. Then Thursday she'd have to take a sick day and visit the used-car lots.

She hated all of it. It was complicity—she'd be a criminal. But it was the price Ned had exacted from her. The insurance hadn't come anywhere near covering all the expenses of Mom's last illness and Ned had been despicably, and typically, cold-hearted about it. "Let her die and get it over with. Pull the plug—let her go."

"Ned!" She'd been astonished, shocked. "She's *your* mother too, you know."

"She's a dying old woman. Making a few doctors rich won't change that." Then he'd given her that quick easy selfish smile. "I'll make you a deal, sister. You want to lavish money on the old woman, fine. I'll let you have the money. But I want a *quid pro quo*. You've got to do a few things for me. Now get out your notebook and let's see you make one of those lists of yours. First I'm going to want a toy gun . . ."

That had been a year ago, at the prison in Atlanta. She'd only visited him once more after that, to tell him about the funeral and ask him when he expected to be released on parole. She'd left quickly, unable to face his indifference to Mom's death.

Now he was getting out, just as he'd planned, and she had to keep her part of the bargain. But it would be all right. After Monday he'd be far away in some distant part of the world and she'd never have to see, or even think about, her brother again.

Thurston found a parking space just off McDonough Boulevard and walked to the entrance gate. The long gray building had a forbidding institutional massiveness. Only a discreet plaque identified it: Atlanta Federal Penitentiary. The "Big A."

Thurston was expected. His credentials got him in. A guard escorted him to a small outer office where he waited a few minutes with a magazine before he was admitted to the Deputy Warden's sanctum.

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The Deputy Warden was a large man with a bushy sand-colored mustache and a beer gut and the plaid-shirt look of a Good Ole Boy who spent his free days hunting with coon hounds and swapping lies in roadhouse taverns.

"Well, now, Mr. Thurston, they didn't tell me exactly what you want down here but we be happy to oblige you if we can. Now you represent the insurance company, that right?" He pronounced "right" as if it were "rat" and put the heavy emphasis on the first syllable of "insurance."

Thurston said, "I work for a private-investigation company. But we're under contract to the insurance people, yes. Indirectly I work for the insurance company. We're still hoping to recover the bonds that Marks stole."

"I can see where they might be just a little bit interested in something like that. They had to pay off the claim in full, I expect?"

"In full," Thurston agreed drily. "We didn't recover any of it."

"But I thought Marks confessed?"

"He did."

The Deputy Warden glanced through a stapled sheaf of papers—possibly the file on Edward "Ned" Marks. "They were bearer bonds, I see. No registered owners, no signatures. Even if you get 'em back, how're you fixin' to identify them?"

"They've got serial numbers."

"Well," the Deputy Warden said, "he's behaved himself here, kept mostly out of trouble, served easy time. Stays out of most folks' way. I haven't had much contact with him. No occasion to. The ones I see are mostly the troublemakers. So there's not a whole lot I can tell you about him."

The Deputy Warden cocked his head over on one side. "You know, that's a pretty fair rate of pay—seven hundred thousand dollars for twenty-eight months easy time. Works out to about twenty-five thousand a month, doesn't it. Good pay, yessirreebob. If he gets to keep it." The eyes narrowed into a shrewd smile. "You're fixin' to see he doesn't get to keep it."

Thurston said, "Well, I'm fixing to try. He's due for release tomorrow morning. I'd appreciate it if you'd point him out to me but not let him see me. I've seen his photographs but they're a few years old and I'd rather have him identified for me in the flesh, just so there's no possibility of a mistake."

"And then you aim to shadow him when he leaves here, that it?"

"Every step of the way."

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Thurston sat in the car in a No Parking zone—"Violators will be towed away"—with an angle of view on the Big A. It looked rather like the Reichstag from this angle—the old one, he thought; the one Hitler had burned down in '33. Thurston took an interest in history, particularly the kind that was told photographically. He had a growing collection of rare old plates—even a few Matthew Brady originals. It was the sort of thing you did when you lived alone, and Thurston preferred to live alone.

He wasn't antisocial. But he'd learned there wasn't anybody whose face he wanted to look at every night and every morning—or at least he'd thought so until recently.

There was one daughter, now thirteen, the souvenir of his youthful romantic illusions, but she was confined to a home for the severely retarded. She didn't recognize him on his infrequent visits, so he didn't feel he had any real ties. He read books, collected his photographic history, played poker quite often, enjoyed his own simple cooking, worked out three times a week in a health club, dated several women most of whom were divorcees; but lately he'd been seeing more of one woman than of the others.

He enjoyed most of all his work. Thurston had been a licensed investigator ever since he'd been discharged from the Military Police in 1968.

He had specialized in insurance cases for seven years now; he had a record of recoveries that no other agent in the company could match, and he took pride in it.

The Ned Marks case had been a special challenge from the beginning. It had come across his desk a year ago; another agent had handled it originally but he'd retired and now it was Thurston's. The self-confident brashness of the Marks theft had intrigued him from the start, mainly because it appeared that Marks had *expected* to be caught.

Marks had been neither surprised nor chagrined when they'd arrested him two days after the bearer bonds had disappeared from the vault of the Sherman Oaks bank where he'd worked for eight months as a junior mortgage officer.

Thurston had inherited a thorough dossier on Marks and he'd committed the salient references to memory. It was a personal history of dreary familiarity to Thurston, who had read a thousand such dossiers and long since lost his capacity for surprise.

Marks was thirty-seven. He'd served in Vietnam, but in a clerical capacity in Saigon—not out in the boonies. There was only one prior

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arrest on the rap sheet. At the age of eighteen he'd stolen the landlord's typewriter and sold it for $25, which he then lost in a schoolyard crap game. His mother had bought another typewriter for the landlord and the case had been dropped.

After his army service and two years of G.I. Bill attendance at a junior college in Santa Ana, Marks had gone to work for a former Vietnam buddy in a shady scheme to sell cut-rate (and worthless) vitamin pills to minor drugstore chains. When the venture went bankrupt under the threat of F.D.A. scrutiny, Marks had drifted into other jobs, mostly in the sort of selling operations that were next door to frauds but just within the law—mail-order junk, real-estate scams, pest exterminating. According to the dossier, one employer had fired him because she suspected him of having embezzled $3000, but nothing was proved and no charges had been brought against him.

Thurston had dealt with Marks's kind before: the cruel solipsists, the me-first sharpies with clever brains and the moral convictions of hungry pariah dogs.

Among the confidential reports in the dossier was an interview with a casual chum of Marks's who'd worked as a bartender in Van Nuys. "He said he'd just got himself a job in some bank over there someplace around Ventura Boulevard. He said it didn't pay much. So I ask him why he took the job, and he gives me that funny smile, like, you know, the way he smiles like he knows something nobody else knows, and he gives me, you know, that old Willie Sutton line about I go to banks because that's where the money is. You know."

So he might have had it in mind to rip off the bank even before he applied for the job there. In any case he'd had eight months to study the operations—the bank's arrangements for the handling of negotiables. On the morning of the theft Marks had gone into the vault to get a deck of traveler's checks, and according to his confession he'd simply slipped the sheaf of bearer bonds under his shirt and walked out with them.

By the time the theft was discovered that afternoon, he'd been out to lunch for an hour and had had plenty of time to dispose of the bonds, at least temporarily. Like everyone else who'd had access to the vault he was searched thoroughly that evening before leaving the bank; they hadn't found anything on him then. But within a day or so the F.B.I. and police had built up a strong circumstantial case against Marks—access, opportunity, fingerprints on the bond shelf,

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and mainly the simple fact that the movements of everyone *else* were accounted for.

When they arrested Marks he was indignant at first, insisting he was innocent; but apparently his lawyer had persuaded him that the evidence against him was too potent to deny. In a cheerful abrupt switch Marks had confessed and entered a plea of guilty to a relatively minor larceny charge, in a bargaining agreement reached between his lawyer and the prosecutors. The federal judge, in sentencing him, had imposed the maximum penalty because of Marks's adamant refusal to make restitution; but the maximum punishment was only four years, which meant about two and one-half years of actual prison time, given the parole system. And because he was judged a nonviolent white-collar offender, Marks had been remanded to the Atlanta facility, which was the government's principal institution for the incarceration of sophisticated or genteel prisoners. Ever since a counterfeiter named Handy Middlebrooks had become Inmate Number One in 1902, the Big A had been the Feds' hostelry for the quiet ones: Eugene Debs, Rudolph Abel, Earl Carroll, Congressman John Langley, Governor Warren McCray. Cons elsewhere called it The Country Club.

Now, watching the entrance from his illegally parked car, Thurston wondered if even this—the choice of site for his 28-month incarceration—had been part of Ned Marks's plan. In his confession Marks had said, "I am relieved and glad to have the uncertainty over with. No longer must I be in suspense as to whether I will be apprehended for my crime. I freely confess my wrongdoing but ask for leniency in view of the fact that I did not at any time place anyone's life or good health in jeopardy." Marks apparently had been coached by his lawyer to talk like that.

It was transparent self-serving piety but perhaps there was some truth in Marks's expression of relief. He hadn't tried very cleverly to destroy evidence. He hadn't provided an alibi for himself or tried to put the blame on anyone else. He hadn't even complained when the maximum sentence was passed.

Now Marks had paid his debt to society and the insurers had paid theirs to the bank—and it was Thurston's job to get it back.

The Deputy Warden had given him a look at Marks yesterday through a window—Marks hadn't seen him—and now Thurston had no trouble recognizing him when Marks walked out of the Big A and loitered a few minutes until a radio-call taxi drew up for him.

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Marks was short and a bit on the plump side. Thinning dark hair, a tiny mustache, the vanity of a small-time con artist.

Thurston put his rent-a-car in Drive and shadowed the cab at a leisurely distance. He was fairly certain Marks would go straight to the airport but with nearly three quarters of a million dollars at stake it was worth playing by the rules.

When Ned Marks boarded the flight for Los Angeles, Thurston was eight rows behind him in an aisle seat and reasonably certain that Marks hadn't made him yet.

The tall guy was either a cop or F.B.I., Ned Marks guessed. Trying to look inconspicuous. But he was still there even though Ned had spent ten minutes in the men's room and the rest of the passengers had gone on to baggage-claim by now.

Well, that was all right. At least now Ned knew what the guy looked like. Tall and fashionably shaggy, a lot of loose brown hair. Could have been an actor in a shaving-cream commercial. Good muscle tone, it looked like, but that was all right too; Ned wasn't going to get in the ring with the guy.

He went across to the information desk and waited his turn in the line. The cop, or whatever he was, had gone over to one of the car-rental counters. Ned said, "My name's Arnold Creber. I think someone left an envelope here for me?"

"Could you spell the name, sir?"

Two minutes later he had the envelope and was out on the curb waiting for the shuttle bus. He didn't bother to look up when the tall cop got on and walked past to sit down a few seats behind him. The guy was a fool if he didn't think he'd been spotted by now.

The envelope contained the car keys and a note from Marie. He skipped the lecture part and focused his attention on the Parking Lot designation—Lot 6, Row D. The license-plate number was on the key tag.

He got off the bus carrying just the little shoulderbag—the things he'd had with him 28 months before when he'd checked into Atlanta, and his $428, and the car keys.

The cop was hanging back, bumbling around the parking lot pretending he couldn't remember where he'd left his car. Ned found the clunker where Marie had parked it. First he checked the trunk. The suitcases were there. He got in and turned the key, dubious about the cheap old car, but it started right up and he grinned amiably

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at the tall cop when he drove out onto the oval airport drive. Left the stupid oaf standing there flatfooted.

Well, there might be another one covering him in a car. So he did a few maneuvers designed to disclose a tail—up and down Freeway ramps. There was a brown car half a block back when he turned onto the Freeway again and he wasn't sure about it, but when he got off the Freeway at the Ventura Boulevard exit he didn't see any brown car in the mirror. It didn't matter a whole lot. Let them follow him if they wanted to waste time and gas.

She'd decided to tell Severn part of the truth. Otherwise he'd be bound to get at least a little bit suspicious. She couldn't just say nothing at all.

"Severn, darling." She embraced him in the doorway and drew him inside. "I've fixed your favorite—Wiener schnitzel and asparagus. Would you like a drink? What time's the show?"

It provoked Severn's measured smile. Everything he did was deliberate; his equanimity was endless. "Wonderful, yes, and eight o'clock. Oh, I booked a table at Scandia, so I'd better cancel it." He kissed her cheek and went toward the phone.

"Vodka and orange juice?"

"Great, sure."

"I found a lovely white wine to go with dinner. At least the man in the store promised me it's lovely." She made his screwdriver and returned from the kitchen with it in time to see him hanging up the phone. He turned, appraised her, and smiled.

"New dress?"

"Heavens, no. I've had it for just ages."

"I haven't seen it before."

She thought back. "No, that's right, I don't think you have. You're so sweet to remember things like that."

"Well, I like it. Wear it again, okay?"

She sat down by him and took his hand. "I have something to tell you. The reason I couldn't see you last night—"

"You don't need to explain anything."

"I had to do some things for my brother."

His glance came up quickly. "I don't think you ever mentioned having a brother."

"His name's Ned. Edward. I haven't really made a secret of it—it's just that I don't like talking about him. It makes me angry just *thinking* about him. The way he treated Mom—"

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Severn put his arm across her shoulders. Marie said, "He's been in prison, you see—" And stopped; she hadn't meant to go that far.

"Prison?"

"He stole money from a bank. A lot of money. Oh, he didn't hold them up with a gun or anything like that. He worked there—he just stole some bonds."

"Like embezzlement, you mean."

"I don't know. He just stole them, you know? Anyway he's served his sentence and he's free now, and I don't imagine I'll ever have to see him again."

"Sounds as if it's just as well. You've got your own life to lead anyway. Oh, by the way, we're invited to dinner at the Ibbetsons' Friday night—Andy's just finished a survey for one of the supermarket chains and I guess the bonus is burning a hole in his pocket. Anyway Andy and Phyl want to take us to El Padrino Friday. I said I'd have to check with you first."

"I'd love to." And she loved, too, the way he'd changed the subject so gently. She looked at the clock. "I'd better put the schnitzel on. It's a peace offering—for standing you up last night."

But he wouldn't let go of her hand, wouldn't let her rise. "The crazy thing is, Marie, I missed you."

"I don't honestly know why on earth you should. I'm nobody's vision of a heartthrob."

"Well, I'm hardly the most scintillating character in the world myself. But we care about each other. That means a lot."

"Don't be soppy." She went into the kitchen, calling back over her shoulder, "Two cutlets or three? They're pretty small."

They probably had a make on the license plates of the car he was driving; that tall cop in the airport parking lot had got a good look at it. So Ned didn't use it Monday morning. He left it parked in a slot behind the motel and took a cab into Studio City. He carried his suitcase through a building and out across Ventura to a bus stop, waited fifteen minutes—the service sure wasn't getting any better around here—and finally boarded a bus, still watching everything at once. If he'd seen anything suspicious he'd have aborted and tried another way, but nobody was watching him that he could see; there hadn't been anyone sitting in any of the parked cars near the bus stop and no one got on the bus with him.

He rode twenty minutes to Van Nuys Boulevard, phoned another taxi from there, and got off several blocks from his destination. He

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walked the rest of the way, into a small branch bank just west of the San Diego Freeway on Wilshire Boulevard.

He wondered if she'd ever looked inside the envelope. There was no sign it had been unsealed. Probably it had never occurred to her to snoop. She was a naive simp.

It had taken him months to prepare it all. Before he'd stolen the bonds. The false passport had been the hardest part. He'd known a guy from the army who'd put him in touch with another guy—he suspected they had some kind of narcotics deal but he didn't ask and didn't want to know—and finally he'd got the passport from a thin little guy in Tijuana.

He'd spent all those months establishing the Arnold Creber identity, right down to the Social Security number and the credit cards and the New Mexico driver's license, and the little savings account in this nondescript Santa Monica bank.

And the safe-deposit box. Arnold Creber's safe-deposit box. Containing $700,000 in negotiable, highly portable bearer bonds.

They didn't even half fill the suitcase. Hardly any weight at all when he carried it back out to the waiting taxi he'd phoned for, got in, and said, "Burbank. I'll tell you where when we get there." And turned to watch the road behind.

Nobody followed him.

Ned clasped the suitcase on his lap and smiled, thinking about baccarat tables, haute cuisine, and mademoiselles in bikinis.

He changed taxis near the Burbank Studios—a two-block walk, a phone call, a ten-minute wait for another cab in a fast-food dump—and got off on a side street and walked a while, and was back in the motel room by noon. Plenty of time left.

He redistributed the bonds in his luggage, packed most of the clothes Marie had bought for him, got into a cheap suit—it wasn't a bad fit, really, but her penuriousness irritated him as usual—put the toy revolver in his belt, and stood before the mirror adjusting the blond wig over his half-bald head.

It didn't go with his eyebrows, he realized, nor with the dark beard stubble. So he shaved as closely as he'd ever shaved in his life and used the nail scissors from his dop kit to chop his eyebrows down to nearly nothing; then he dusted them with talc. What the hell, they'd grow back in time. Small enough price to pay.

The blond guy in the mirror was a stranger, sure enough. He grinned.

He circled the clunker at a distance. Nobody was watching it. He

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drove it around the block. Still no surveillance. So he got the suitcases out of the motel room, stowed them in the car, and drove away.

An hour later he was boarding a PSA flight at Burbank Airport, San Diego bound.

The security detector hadn't sniffed out the toy revolver because it was made of plastic, like all the cheap junk they sold these days. When Ned was a kid even a *toy* gun used to be made out of real metal, but no more.

Well, never mind. After today he'd be able to buy a *platinum* gun if he wanted one. But at least the toy *looked* real. Remember how John Dillinger broke out of prison with a gun he'd carved out of a bar of soap and blackened with soot and ashes.

At San Diego he went along to the Aeronaves counter and got out his ticket, from Marie's envelope, and the passport. Arnold Creber, citizen of the world. He flashed a confident smile at the dark girl and she smiled right back, but that was when he caught a sidewise glimpse of somebody coming up fast, and he turned to see the two men striding toward him: a uniformed cop and the tall guy with all the brown hair.

The uniformed cop said, "Excuse me. Edward Marks? Like to see you a minute." The paper in his hand had to be a warrant.

"My name's not Marks. You got me confused with somebody. My name's Creber."

"Sure. Arnold Creber," said the tall guy with the brown hair. "Just come along, all right? It won't take but a minute." And the tall guy smiled slowly.

Nobody ever said Ned Marks doesn't think fast. So fast it took the uniformed cop completely by surprise when Ned whipped out the revolver, leveled it at the tall guy, and darted his left hand against the uniformed cop's throat. He whipped around behind the cop and jammed the revolver against his collar.

"Back off," he snarled at the tall guy. *"Now!"*

He heard a quick intake of breath—the airline girl.

But the tall guy only kept smiling that slow infuriating smile. He calmly stepped forward and plucked the gun from his hand.

"You shouldn't play with toys, Ned."

"How—how the hell did you *know?"*

"We've got a warrant to search you and your luggage for stolen bonds."

"Who the hell are you?"

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"Just a private cop, name of Thurston. My company works for the insurance company you hooked for seven hundred thousand dollars."

"Nobody followed me here," Ned said. "Nobody. How could you've found me?"

Thurston only answered that one with his slow smile.

Thurston brought the receipt into the office and dropped it on Andy Ibbetson's desk. "The San Diego police will keep the evidence until they've sent Marks to Chino for transporting stolen property. Then we get it back."

"About time." Andy pushed the receipt toward his In pile. "Nice job. You can buy a round-the-world vacation on the bonus for this one."

"For two?"

"You that serious about her?"

"I am. But she may not feel the same way about me when she finds out I read the shopping list in her handbag."

"That's how you knew he'd be at the San Diego airport with the loot, huh?"

"In the name of Arnold Creber. In a blond wig. Carrying a toy gun," said Severn Thurston.

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an unknown Randolph Mason story by

MELVILLE DAVISSON POST

Randolph Mason was Melville Davisson Post's most important character creation prior to the detective debut of Uncle Abner. The first book, THE STRANGE SCHEMES OF RANDOLPH MASON, published in 1896, introduced the earliest "criminal" lawyer in mystery fiction. Note the quotation marks: they mean an unscrupulous lawyer who uses the inadequacies and weaknesses of the law to defeat justice.

In the second book, THE MAN OF LAST RESORT, published in 1897, Randolph Mason was still obsessed with one idea: that the difficulties of men are problems that Mason can solve, and that the law, being of human origin, can be circumvented.

As the years passed, Melville Davisson Post came to regret his original characterization. In the third and last book, THE CORRECTOR OF DESTINIES, published in 1908 (note the date), the "criminal" lawyer reformed and began to use his vast legal knowledge to aid, rather than to defeat, justice . . .

John F. Suter, author of the new Uncle Abner stories appearing in these pages, has found a Randolph Mason tale not printed in any of Mr. Post's books. It is titled "The Marriage Contract" and was published in *Pearson's Magazine,* issue of June, 1908—obviously too late to be included in THE CORRECTOR OF DESTINIES of 1908. To the best of our knowledge this Randolph Mason story has never been reprinted, not in the 73 years since it first appeared.

We now present a slightly abridged version—a truly interesting discovery that will recall Melville Davisson Post's richly textured early prose, so different from the spare, austere later style so appropriate for Uncle Abner . . .

"Q"

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THE MARRIAGE CONTRACT

by MELVILLE DAVISSON POST

It began at Lady Mary's house party on Loch Leven. It was obvious to the shrewd old woman long before I saw it. She asked me quite frankly about Martin: she wished to throw every safeguard about her old friend's daughter; of course she knew that Martin was the right sort, or else Lord Glenranald would not have brought him up from the Riviera and given him the run of the Highlands.

I gave her what little information I had. I had seen the man once at the Von Humbert's in New York, and infrequently at the clubs. He came from one of the Southern states, and was quoted wealthy. She took the little I had to give and went with Saunders in the dog-cart to talk it over with Lord Glenranald.

From an American point of view I considered the hubbub premature. The two were good companions, and I was sure Dabney Martin was fond of Muriel Hepworth in a way. She was impressive, like a Diana, with an exquisite complexion, a cheery note in her voice, and a big comfortable air of good-fellowship.

The two tramped about inseparably. They prodded around the village, and pieced out forgotten details of the great massacre of Glencoe. They used to tell us stories about it at dinner with the air of a Marco Polo. They discovered, too, the very point of land where Stevenson's hero in *Kidnapped* crossed the Loch, and then traced his wanderings like a pair of country surveyors. We had it all at dinner.

After Lady Mary had so positively declared a wind, I began to look out for straws. I observed nothing except that Muriel took a longer time than any of the other girls to dress for dinner; but then every English woman depends upon this metamorphosis under the candlesticks. The transformation of an angular, flat woman in the baggy tweeds of a Highland tailor into an exquisite, dainty creature in a gown from the Rue de la Paix is more potent, I think, than even a Homeric blow, to loosen a man's knees; it seems the gorgeous result of some witchery, like a fairy kiss.

Originally appeared in Pearson's Magazine, June 1908; reprinted by permission of Robert P. Mills, Ltd., agent for the Estate of Melville Davisson Post.

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So I was not entirely prepared for it when Martin stepped into the subject Wednesday evening, after dinner. The two of us were alone in the smoking room. Monseigneur Stanhope, who did not smoke, was entertaining Lady Mary in the drawing-room. Martin came at once to the point.

"Mr. Parks," he said, selecting a cigarette from the box on the table, "I seem to require the services of a friend."

I arose and bowed, as we are taught to do by the elder Salvini when a principal's honor is up. Then I added, "But the antagonist, my dear sir, is he a specter at Glenranald's pier?"

"The antagonist to be reckoned with just now," said Martin, "is a London barrister. You are doubtless aware that the English have a very sensible way of requiring a settlement on the daughter before the wedding. Admiral Hepworth's representative will come to Edinburgh tomorrow, and I thought that perhaps you would do me the favor to meet him there."

"But, my dear sir," I said, "I have never been on such a mission. I should be the rawest of shirt-sleeve diplomats. I do not even know if such a paper should follow the phraseology of deeds, 'To wit, In consideration of one wife, the receipt whereof is hereby acknowledged'; or that of an indictment, 'Dabney Martin, not having the fear of God before his eyes, and being moved and seduced by the instigation of the devil'; nor the plan of such barter, whether one should say, 'Not another sequin, my lord,' or raise the offer slowly by guineas, like the good Isaac of York."

"I presume," said Martin dryly, "that pleasantries attach to such an occasion as to a first of April. Seriously, however, I require someone to go down for me."

"But, my friend," I said, unable to resist the twitting, "I do not know what the English are accustomed to ask for a wife, nor yet how far down it is to the bottom of your pocket."

"Pardon me, Mr. Parks," he said, with marked, deliberate courtesy, "could you not learn what they desire in the matter, and tell me of it on your return? May I hope that you will go?"

"Oh, of course I will go," I answered, leaning back in the great chair with an air of comfortable banter. "Such an experience would be worth years at the King's Bench."

But Martin did not remain to catch my further arrows. "Thank you," he said, and went out into the garden with his cigarette.

I saw him set off alone to the pier, his cigarette a dodging point of light. It was the lover's instinct. Muriel had been packed off to

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Hepworth Seat and the Admiral on Monday. Martin's ship went out of Glasgow on Sunday, and matters doubtless must be settled. He had given up his passage from London for a week longer with Lady Mary.

I presently found that the object of the conference at Edinburgh was merely a first sitting of envoys, and not a meeting to affix seals. I think Lady Mary and Lord Glenranald were behind it; they wished to know exactly what estate Martin could settle before Muriel got beyond a life-line.

I got back the following day, and made my report to Martin after luncheon. We had finished a cigar on the stone bench in the garden above the Coe before a word was spoken of the treaty. The day was perfect. The usual gusts of rain had gone through the Glen Lion Pass to Aberdeen. The mists rolled slowly up like a curtain to the summit of the Pap. The air was bracing, like a dash of water.

Martin sat with his legs stretched out on the gravel walk, his hands in his pockets, his eyes following the gleam of a steel band along the border of the Loch, where the car-track lies like a dragoon's cap-chain on the chin of the mountain. It was the way Muriel Hepworth had gone. Finally he threw what remained of his cigar into Lady Mary's hedge and turned to me.

"Well?" he said.

"The Admiral's barrister," I replied, "a person in form like an Episcopal clergyman, demanded an accounting of your estates."

"A what?" he said.

"A list of your flocks and herds," I answered. "An assessor's inventory, upon which to estimate the lady's value to you."

"You did not have it," he said. "I forgot that."

"No," I replied, "I had from you only one exact direction—to find out what they wanted. I waived off the barrister by the query, with a profound gesture as of an envoy asked thoughtlessly to produce a poll-sheet of his king's subjects. I pinned him instantly to the wall with the only point at issue, your point, so succinctly put in your directions—What did they want? He got his papers out of his pocket then and his lawyer tongue to wagging. I listened for two mortal hours to all the family precedents of settlements."

I stopped here, and took a folded sheet of foolscap from my pocket.

"It seems," I continued, consulting the foolscap, "that Sir William Hepworth, in 1815, settled five hundred pounds and the estate of Ingleford Wood, of which he was seized in fee simple, on Lady Agnes

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Dunne; that in '51 George Hepworth, Esquire, your esteemed father-in-law elect, contracted for the relict of Lord Hungerford Whatcomb, of Whatcomb, for one thousand guineas down, the manor house of Hepworth Seat, and an acquittance of courtesy in the said manor, its appurtenances and hereditaments, as well as a release of its rents, profits, earnings and increases forever. But the barrister pointed out that this latter case was not to be cited as a leading precedent in point, because the lady was a widow, and I take it, somewhat marked down.

"Now, Cecelia Agnes Hepworth, the elder sister of Miss Muriel, brought something like a proper value, the barrister thought. She went to the young Earl of Ballycock, over other bidders, at nine hundred a year, and a life estate, with a reversion to the heir, in all that moiety of the ancestral lands lying and being situate—"

"I beg your pardon," said Martin, with a severe, precise clipping of the words; "leave the rest of it out, please. What do they want?"

I think he could have murdered me with the keenest pleasure.

"As you like," I replied with gravity. "They want two thousand pounds a year in the rents of estates real."

He got up at that and walked backward and forward along the gravel path. Finally he stopped before me.

"Conveyed to trustees, I presume," he said.

"No," I answered, "conveyed directly by deeds in fee to Muriel Hepworth. The barrister feared prejudice in your courts against alien trustees. He doubted, also, their ability to interfere with sufficient swiftness if the settlement were threatened. He thought Miss Muriel should be invested with the title to the lands direct."

Martin did not reply. He mused a moment, drawing down the corners of his eyes, then he walked slowly up the carriage road to the house, his chin thrust forward and his hands clasped behind his back. At the garden gate he remembered the default in his manner and called back to me.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "I am much in your debt for this great courtesy."

Then he passed out of sight behind a bed of rhododendrons.

I was rather ashamed of my flippancy after the man had gone. He was a gentleman of my own people, in a land of strangers. The custom which he was required to meet was a delicate one of unfamiliar detail. He had come to me for a timely hand, for the intimate courtesy of a close friend, and I had gone at the matter with a cackling of "end-man" banter, and the gibes of a traveling bagman.

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I was much ashamed when Saunders found me a few moments later with a request from Lady Mary to make the fourth at bridge.

I did not talk again with Martin. He left at four o'clock for a day with Muriel at Hepworth Seat, and then went on his ship at Glasgow. I came back to New York a week later on the *Grosser Kurfuerst* from Southampton.

The following April I was in Washington, carrying an instruction of Randolph Mason to a client summoned before a sitting of the Inter-state Commerce Commission. On Saturday at eleven o'clock the chairman adjourned the hearing until Monday, and I went down to my hotel for luncheon undecided about a plan for my half holiday and the long Sunday at his heels.

The lure of spring was everywhere. A tramp over one of the battlefields of our great Civil War presented itself as a pleasing solution of the problem, but it meant either an aimless straddling of walls and fences, or else the company of an intolerable guide.

I was debating the matter over my planked shad when a messenger brought me a letter, accompanied by a note of apology from the Secretary of the Commission saying it had arrived Thursday in his care and had been overlooked until today.

This letter was at once a surprise of the keenest character and a gracious solution of my problem. It was from Dabney Martin, asking me to run out to his place at Martinsburg for Sunday. He had learned from the newspapers that I was in Washington. He added that Muriel Hepworth was visiting his mother, and, the line was underscored, "I particularly need to see you."

I instantly determined to go. The little town was within a few hours of Washington, and a call on Muriel Hepworth was a courtesy which Lady Mary would naturally expect of me. Besides, I was keen to know how the matter of the alliance stood. I sent a telegram to Martin and took an afternoon train.

I was met at the station in the quaint little Southern town by a white-headed old Negro, who, I presently learned, was named Beauregard. He told me that "Marse Dabney had pottered off some'eres" and "Miss Sally" had sent him to "ride me over in the buggy." The "buggy" proved to be a superb victoria drawn by a pair of sorrel geldings.

I had an impression of the atmosphere of southern Italy as we passed through the white limestone dust of the village; there was a faint odor, like that heavier one lying always in the streets of

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Naples—the scent of far-off gardens wafted over smoldering wood ashes. I looked to see the victoria swing around a corner to a bay paved with turquoise, where noisy tourists clambered into Monsieur Cook's steamboat, and tossed copper coins wrapped in white paper to an equally copper diver who constantly shouted the only foreign word he knew, "Money! Money!"

At the end of a mile we came upon a grove of ancient sugar maples, above which sat a house on a little hill, its white columns gleaming through the leaves and its gray roof melting into the haze of the mountains beyond. A little old woman in black with white ruching at her throat and wrists came down the steps between the plaster pillars to the victoria.

I shall not lose that view of her while my memory remains. Her dress was plain, even severe, and yet she brought me out of the carriage to my feet as though she wore a coronet. I thought swiftly that an English woman would be like that if her fathers had lived two hundred years on the Riviera. She greeted me with simple courtesy, and then the two of us went up to Muriel, standing in the door.

Had I been a stranger on this afternoon, I should never have questioned Virginia's title to this tall girl on the threshold. She had obeyed the call of the sun for soft clinging gowns of snowy whiteness, and her lithe figure, escaped now from the abominations of a Highland tailor, was adorably sylvan.

I saw, too, that the girl was happy, wondrously, splendidly happy, as those are who run out from their father's doorway to follow the oldest piper in the world, his little bare feet strutting in the dust, and his dimpled hands fingering a reed that laughs at Solomon.

After formal greetings and a word of inquiry about Lady Mary, Beauregard took me with my bag to the guest chamber, laid out my evening clothes, and brought jugs of hot water.

I did not see Dabney Martin until dinner, and then I at once marked a change in his face since I had sat with him in Lady Mary's garden. There was no traceable ravage in the fine bronze of any feature, nor yet any expression fixed enough to analyze; but, now and then, when the talk passed by him, an unmistakable stress showed in his eyes and the rigid setting of his mouth—the strain of some burden on his shoulders. I knew, as well as though one had said it, that trouble sat with this man, hugging him in his coat.

While the dinner progressed, I found my perceptions, trained under Randolph Mason, at work. The mother was regarding this incident as closed, with the ceremony read and ended and the daughter

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in her place. The girl, hopelessly in love, and seeing the gates open, was already in Paradise. But the man—and I caught again that sinister tension in his eyes—"Behold!" as the passer in Florence used to say of Dante, "this man is now in hell."

There was here, apparently, some disaster known only to Dabney Martin. Some mine of which he alone saw the fuse smoking, some evil news of which he had not yet the heart to tell. His note to me was envoy of a weightier matter than a mere courtesy. The last line of it, then, was a cry for help.

I wondered vaguely if that barrister of the United Kingdom had named a sum beyond him. But such a thing as that would hardly set so hopeless a shadow in his eyes. These folk in England were quite as sensible as our esteemed selves. If the settlement were out of proportion to his means it could be altered to suit his fortunes.

After dinner Mrs. Martin and Muriel went with Beauregard to call somewhere in the village, and my host took me to the library for a cigar. It was a fine old room, floored in narrow sugar boards, smooth and hard as tiles; tall windows with a row of little panes on either side of the movable sash; a paneling of oak around the walls; the furniture of mahogany, the chairs and sofa covered with black haircloth.

I smoked silently in a chair by the window, waiting like a surgeon, for the man to remove the bandage from his wound. Martin lighted his cigar and sat down by a quaint old desk rising into a bookcase to the ceiling with closed doors above crossed by strips of veneer, heavy drawers below, with oblong brass knobs, and a single mahogany piece with a worn finger-hole, to be pulled down for a writing-board.

The cigar went out and he sat chewing the end of it, the muscles of his face standing out clear as in a bronze.

"Mr. Parks," he said finally, "do you think that actual justice is ever possible to the law?"

I was surprised at this opening so far around the bush. "Randolph Mason is famous for having said," I answered, " 'All things are possible to the law—even justice.' "

"I have found it," he went on, "the very refuge of injustice. The most dangerous criminal of this country has stripped me of practically all that I possess, in the open light of day, by a method as direct and villainous as though he had held a pistol to my head; and when I pointed him out to the law, as he was literally walking away with my money in his pocket, the law calmly stepped out of his path

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and informed me that it was powerless to touch him. There was no doubt, no concealment, no mistake, the man's notorious career was known, his villainous act was known, the criminal intent of it was known, and yet he lived as openly as you or I, in a good hotel, and, when it pleased him finally to do so, went quietly out of the country."

The cigar fell from my fingers in my astonishent.

"What do you mean?" I said. "What is this you are saying?"

"Not a word," he replied with a slow, deliberate intonation, "but the exact, assured facts. When I returned from Scotland last September, Joseph Carr came here from a Western state with a celebrated geologist and examined a coal outcrop on my lands in the foothills of the Blue Ridge. After the geologist had carefully gone over the property and returned, Carr came to me and said frankly that I possessed coalfields of inestimable value; that the anthracite strata of Pennsylvania, lost beyond the Appalachian range, came up again to the surface on my lands.

"He offered to form a partnership with a working capital of one hundred thousand dollars, put in a railroad switch to the lands, and operate this coal. He gave me several references to financial concerns in New York, and asked me to decide the matter as swiftly as possible.

"The directness robbed me of suspicion. Nevertheless, I wrote to the references and was advised that Carr was a man of large financial relations. I learned that the geologist was the most famous in America, in fact the greatest authority on coalfields in the world. I wrote Carr that I would take the matter up with him. He came back again, talking of millions. Nor was the talk improbable, for, if we had the anthracite fields of Pennsylvania as near to tidewater as my lands, their value was indeed fabulous.

"In the end I agreed to join him in the enterprise, provided he could raise the money necessary for the development. He said that he would furnish the collateral to secure a loan of the money, so we formed the partnership of Carr and Martin, and borrowed one hundred thousand dollars on our joint notes and Carr securities. He managed the loan with some bank in which he was said to be interested, the paper running for one year. The money was deposited in a national bank of the city in which he resided."

Martin paused a moment as though to bring the facts clearly before him.

"Then," he continued, "without subterfuge, openly, this Joseph

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Carr signed a check with the firm name, drew out the money, concealed it, and sat down quietly in his hotel."

Martin stopped again, then he went on,

"I had him arrested for embezzlement. He was instantly released. The district attorney said that as Carr was a member of the firm of Carr and Martin, he had the right and authority to sign the firm name, and that it was no embezzlement for him to take the partnership funds. I remember the exact words of the judge who released him, 'The misappropriation of partnership funds by one of the general partners, with felonious intent, does not constitute embezzlement.' "

He paused for another eloquent comment of silence.

"I learned then that Carr was a notorious criminal—I call him that, others call him a financier—using known weak places in the law with which to rob men of their property. He seemed to understand and keep well within the law, and, thereby grown rich, came to have respectable relations with bankers and posed as a person of financial importance.

"I learned, further, that his collateral was worthless, and that the banks relied entirely on the value of my signature to the notes, and that the great geologist, whom Carr had paid a thousand dollars for his trip, while, in fact reporting to him the evidences of anthracite on my lands, believed it to be a mere bastard outcrop, of no commercial value. Then Carr played the bankrupt, and a little later, went with his wife to Mexico."

Martin was silent so long that I thought his extraordinary story ended. Then he went on.

"I am not quite finished. On the eighteenth day of March this thief died of fever at Tampico. His wife immediately returned to New York and through a foreign financial agent purchased the outstanding notes of 'Carr and Martin.' Then, on the first day of the month, he informed me that, if at the maturity of the notes in November I would execute a mortgage on my estate here, he would generously extend the paper for an additional year. This woman is fully aware that I cannot pay, and that such a mortgage would finally be foreclosed. Joseph Carr preferred my money. His wife, it seems, would rather have my home."

He got up then and set his chair carefully to one side, put his finger into the hole of the mahogany desk-board, and drew it down, revealing a little row of pigeonholes. From one of these he took a bundle of papers in a foreign wrapper.

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"Mr. Parks," he said, "here are the papers in the matter which you so kindly took up for me at Edinburgh. Won't you please present these facts to Admiral Hepworth's representative and terminate the negotiations?"

I do not remember ever to have been present at a scene so tragic. There was something to me irresistible and crushing in the directness of Martin's story, its lack of comment, its long periods of silence. The simple words he used, his calmness, his dignity, gave to the misfortune that air of the inevitable which impresses one in the presence of death.

The consequences were projected before my mental gaze with an amplitude of detail which no torrent of impassioned words could have made as vivid: I saw this queenly old woman of the South deposed, her possessions fouled by the uses of a barbarian; I saw every galleon of her son's hopes going down on the high seas, leaving him ruined for all time to come; I saw the happiness burning out of Muriel Hepworth's face, consuming her youth with it. This was the terrible canvas which the man's words unrolled before me. I understood now why he lifted up his eyes in torment. The facts seemed to be complete and final disaster, like those inevitable in nature.

In spite of my rigorous training, the blood sobbed in my throat; the dim light in the room fortunately covered my emotion. Martin walked over to the window and stood looking out, his hands clasped hopelessly behind his back.

When I could control my voice, I arose and spoke to him.

"Mr. Martin," I said, "before those papers are returned you must come to New York and talk this matter over with Randolph Mason."

Martin replied without interest, without turning from the window, "I have gone over it with any number of lawyers."

"But not with Randolph Mason," I said. "Will you promise to come and present the case to him before you do anything further?"

Martin did not at once reply. He remained at the window. I stood behind him looking out over his head at the beautiful Italian night. The moon was rising. I heard the hammering of horses on a road. Presently the victoria turned into the long lane before the ancient sugar trees, and drew up before the door. Mrs. Martin stepped out and came into the house. I heard her passing along the hall. Muriel Hepworth remained laughing on the steps, in conversation with Beauregard. I knew for whom she was waiting. I had only a further moment in which to bind him to a promise. I would return to New York in the morning.

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"My friend," I said, "will you promise me that?"

"Why, yes," he said in a listless, uninterested voice; "if you like, I will come to see Mr. Mason."

But he never came.

Life differs from a play in the staging of its dramatic incidents; it brings on the acute moment with no regard to setting. There is little of painted canvas, of soft lights, of tense, thrilling pauses. The crucial moment in one's fortune comes on, like Death, anywhere. One has seen the curtain go down in the day-coach of an ordinary train, on the street curb, as a man sat at breakfast with his newspaper, as he went up the doorsteps of his house with the latch key in his hand.

On the night of the twenty-third of April I dined with Randolph Mason at the Dresden. We were late for dinner. One of the great trust companies of New York had failed, and Mason had met here with the directors. The meeting had been prolonged, and it was ten o'clock before we came into the dining room.

We had a place in a remote corner. The lights were mostly out and a background of empty tables stretched behind through the long room to the door. I sat facing this door, Mason beyond me, the little cluster of lights on the table bringing out the deep, seamy lines in his face, the shadows under his eyebrows, the features, that seemed, sometimes, curiously to distend, as though the vitality in the man subjected them to pressure when he labored with a problem.

I was beginning to wonder how long flesh and blood would stand this tremendous strain. Twice, already, he had broken down. Once I had taken him to the Riviera, and the sun and the sea air of southern France had got him on his feet; the second time, the credit of his recovery is part of the deserved fame of two New York physicians.

When I sat before Randolph Mason in silence, as on this night, this question usually came to me. There was the experience of his breakdowns upon the one side, and upon the other that strange, incomprehensible mastery exercised by the mind over the machinery of the body. Randolph Mason was to me a continuing wonder; he slept little, and with no regularity; he ate sparingly, at no fixed hours; I have tried, and Pietro has untiringly tried, to bring these habits to some order. The mind worked with the order of a law, but the machine that the mind drove was wholly disregarded. And yet,

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as though the very tenacity of the man's will held it together, the machine remained.

I was intent upon this speculation, when three persons, entering the dining room, drew my attention to the door; they were Dabney Martin, his mother, and Muriel Hepworth. They had evidently arrived by a late train, the evidences of travel were on them. The waiter took them to a table across the room, turned on the lights, and the three sat down to order dinner.

The mother was placed with her back toward me, so I could not see her face, but Martin was directly before me and Muriel Hepworth's profile was clearly in my line of sight.

I was struck by their faces, as by a physical blow. I understood at once how matters had gone:

Martin had not explained his position to this girl. He was leaving that to the English barrister, to be done formally when she returned to her own country. The state of his fortunes had driven him into a strained and formal relation toward her, which she did not understand. That was clear. There was inquiry, misery, a profoundly puzzled atmosphere about her. In the man's face there was all we know of distress, lying behind a mask of courtesy.

It was a situation to break the heart. One could easily imagine the history of those two persons from the day I came out of Martinsburg—the steps by which the girl came to see that the man was changed; her speculations; the conclusions to which she must naturally have come; the humiliation; the struggle with her pride; the resolute, silent acceptance of this changed destiny, and the grim taking up of the counterpart to that inexplicable attitude which Dabney Martin had assumed.

I wondered if I ought to cross the room and pay my respects to the party, or whether it were better to go quietly out.

Dabney Martin had not come to Randolph Mason, as I had hoped. I had laid the whole matter before Mason, on my return to New York from Martinsburg, preparatory to such a meeting. About this time New York was running after the fad of oriental philosophy; Mrs. Schenley-Gaynor had included a Hindu as a feature of an afternoon tea; we were all going about discussing learnedly the origin of religions. It happened, then, that I had a copy of the Bible in my hand when I went in one night to present Martin's quandary to Mason.

When I had finished, he rested his elbow on the table, his chin in

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the fork of his thumb and doubled finger, and looked me in the face with a curious sarcastic smile.

"What did you advise?" he said.

"I could not advise," I replied; "I did not know the law."

He looked down at the book that I carried in my hand, and the sarcastic smile deepened on his lips.

"If you had known the Scriptures," he said, "you would not have required to know the law. The only direction that your friend needs he will find in the 62nd verse of the IXth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke."

Then he turned back to the papers on his table.

That night I looked up the reference, but it gave me no light; it attached itself to no solution of Dabney Martin's problem.

"No man having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the Kingdom of God."

The text was doubtless clear enough to those for whom St. Luke intended it, but when applied to Dabney Martin it was obscurely Delphic. I went with that text to Cruden. I read there learned dissertations, with no profit. My head swam over stilted Latin rhetoric, and I gave it up.

Meanwhile Muriel Hepworth had drawn off her gloves and Martin was ordering dinner. I determined to slip out of the room while his attention was taken with the menu and wait for Mason in the lobby. I was moving my chair back, when Dabney Martin lifted his head, looked leisurely across the room, and nodded to me. Then he spoke a word to his mother, arose, and crossed the long, empty dining room to the table where I sat with Randolph Mason.

I got up, extended my hand, inquired after the health of the two ladies, and then presented him to Mr. Mason.

Randolph Mason did not rise. He made no conventional remark. He looked up at Martin with that same curious, sarcastic smile with which he had greeted my story of Martin's misfortune.

"Mr. Parks tells me," he said, "that you are shortly to be congratulated."

The blood mounted into Martin's face, and I came forward to explain and to apologize—I had laid his difficulties before Mr. Mason; I had taken that liberty, it was out of old friendship—in the hope of lending some aid.

Randolph Mason paid no attention to my words. He continued to look, with his peculiar smile, at Martin.

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"Why do you blush?" he said. "Marriage is an institution called honorable among men."

There was a distinct taunt in his voice.

I was beside myself with confusion. Martin was as white as plaster of Paris. But when he spoke his voice was steady and composed, and my admiration for him deepened.

"It is not because I am ashamed," he said.

"Why is it then?" said Mason, grinding on the sore spot.

"It is because I am ruined," the man answered—and I put him on a pedestal.

Mason's body jerked in the chair. His lips drew back from his teeth. He made a contemptuous gesture.

"Ruined!" he said. "It is a word lying only in the mouth of the incompetent."

A moment the idea lashed him. Then he came back to his biting, sarcastic gibes. His eyes narrowed. His mouth twisted with a contemptuous smile.

"When you have obtained favor of the Lord, Mr. Martin," he said, "you will not be ruined."

"When I have obtained favor of the Lord?" repeated the man. "I am not likely to obtain favor of the Lord."

"Why, yes," said Mason, "that is exactly what you are about to do."

"About to do!" echoed Martin, now utterly astonished.

"Precisely that," replied Mason, "if we can take Solomon for it. I shall quote that celebrated Oriental, and Mr. Parks, who is learned in the Scriptures"—here he pinned me with a glance—"will correct me if I put it wrong. 'Whoso findeth a wife, findeth a good thing, and obtaineth favor of the Lord.' Eh, Parks!" And he indicated me with a deferential, ironic gesture.

A hard gray light came into Martin's eyes.

"This is sheer nonsense," he said.

"Why, no, my dear sir," replied Mason, "Solomon is what would be called in the law a leading authority; and in your particular case, I assure you, he is quite right."

"I thank you for the compliment to Miss Hepworth," said Martin.

"I do not indulge in compliments," replied Mason.

Then his whole manner changed. He took the cigar out of his mouth and ground the lighted end of it on the dish before him. His taunting, sardonic manner vanished. His features grew hard and regular, his mouth firm, his eyes steady and direct. He leaned his

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elbow on the cloth, fixed his glance on Dabney Martin, and began a volley of rapid, searching queries.

"Are there any judgments or liens of record against your estate?"

The change in Randolph Mason affected Dabney Martin. He saw that some definite object lay behind these enigmatic speeches, and he remained to answer, like a witness before a court.

"No," he said. "Why do you ask?"

Mason ignored the query.

"What are these estates worth, everything?"

"Well," he answered, "Carr had his estimate about right. One hundred thousand dollars, I should say; perhaps twenty-five more on a fair margin."

"Would that mean two thousand pounds a year income?" said Mason.

"Why, no," he replied, "hardly that; seven or eight thousand dollars perhaps. But why do you ask?"

"Pardon me," said Mason, "when were you and Muriel Hepworth to be married?"

He turned squarely around at that, and his chin went up.

"Mr. Mason," he said, uttering each word as though it stood alone, "is not that question obviously irrelevant?"

Mason got up from the table, stepped behind his chair, and took hold of its back with his two hands.

"And you expected to live here in your own house?"

"I beg of you, Mr. Mason," said Dabney Martin, in the same even, exact tones, "not to return to your recent ironical manner. Do you not understand that I am now practically a bankrupt; that the courtesy I asked of Mr. Parks was to make this known to Admiral Hepworth's solicitor, and thereby permit them to dismiss me? Is it not clear to you that my marriage with Muriel Hepworth, which was to take place in June, at Hepworth Seat, and our after life here in my house, cannot now take place?"

"On the contrary," said Mason, "it must now imperatively take place."

Martin looked as though he thought Mason had gone suddenly mad.

"I fail utterly," he remarked, "to understand what you mean."

"I mean," said Mason, "that the law which permitted one man to take away your property, will now permit another to bring it back to you."

"Your remarks," replied Martin, "are utterly unintelligible to me."

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"I mean," Mason went on, "that if you sign the marriage contract as prepared by the English barrister, if you then marry Muriel Hepworth in June at Hepworth Seat, as you intended, she, as your wife, under such a contract given in consideration of marriage, would hold these lands against the outstanding notes of 'Carr and Martin.' "

Martin came up close to the table where Mason stood.

"What is that?" he said.

"It is the law of the State where your lands are situate," said Mason, "that marriage is a good consideration for deeds of real estate, in the absence of actual fraud, participated in by *both* parties, although the husband may thereby render himself insolvent.

"Muriel Hepworth knows nothing of your present insolvency. She cannot, therefore, be charged with either notice or fraud. She will enter into this marriage before the law in consideration of these lands. The consideration of marriage is one of the highest and most inviolate known to the courts, since no human agency can put the woman back into the status she occupied before the contract was entered into. There are no judgments or liens of record to advise her solicitor of your insolvency. The title to these lands is clean of all encumbrances. She cannot know, by any diligence, of your notes in the hands of Joseph Carr's widow.

"Therefore, Muriel Hepworth, as your wife, will hold these lands, every sod, every grass blade, every twig, literally, in the language of your barrister's contract, forever."

I know what the word transfiguration means, because I saw the phenomenon of it that night. I saw a man's face made literally to shine, I saw his body illumined as with candles when Martin came fully to understand the sweeping significance of Randolph Mason's words. He remained a moment, his head up, his shoulders lifted, his eyes fixed. Then he turned away without a sentence, without a gesture, down the long empty dining room, in among the chairs, the tables, to the place where Muriel Hepworth sat. And he walked like one entering into a kingdom.

I saw, too, another thing of greater magic. I saw a woman's mind run forward, and in a flash divine the essentials of a changed condition. I saw the inquiry, the misery, the puzzled atmosphere darkling about her, disappear, as though exorcised by some blessed saint; and all this—this climax in two lives, this windfall of fortune, this tense, thrilling dramatic moment—arriving with no concern for the

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fitness of its stage, in the commonplace surroundings of a hotel dining room, after the manner of death, wherever those concerned happen for the moment to be.

And then, on the instant, I sensed something of the looming proportions of the man who thus masterfully changed the destinies of others, who thus surely seized and rearranged events, so that justice was done where injustice was intended. And I seemed to realize that only the great machinery of the world was a fixed unchangeable thing. And if one could feed events into that machinery in a certain order, or rearrange them in the slots of that machinery as they were passing through, then right and happiness would invariably result.

Randolph Mason took up his cigar, relighted it, and went out of the dining room, his face returned to its curious sarcastic smile. I arose and followed him. And as I followed, I thought of another thing. Somewhere I had read how the skill of a great surgeon, putting together the fragments in each case, had added two thousand years to the lives of his patients. How much, I wondered, had Randolph Mason added to the sum of human right—of human happiness? How much had he added to the gross sum of human justice?

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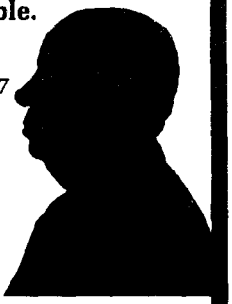

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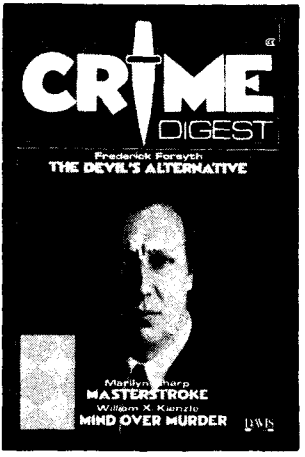

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THE POWER OF THE TONGUE

by JOHN F. SUTER

A shadow lay over the land.

When such a thing happens, and the people cannot see what casts the shadow, they sometimes invent strange and surprising causes for it . . .

An unusual act of defiance of our national government drew my Uncle Abner and my mother into a matter that neither liked. It was not the act of defiance itself that brought this about, but one of the principal reasons for it.

The year was nearly half over, and it was already clear that it was another in a string of bad years. It was hoped that the presidential election would bring a change for the better.

It was also the year for the census. The government man, a Mr. McHenry, was at our house asking his questions. Knowing that he would be there, Uncle Abner had ridden over, to save time for both himself and McHenry.

Because my father was no conversationalist and my uncle often preferred to listen, my mother addressed our visitor as he was finishing his questions. Perhaps, being closer to his size than these big men, she wanted to put him at ease.

"Mr. McHenry, do you find this work difficult?" she asked. "Do the people answer you willingly, or are they hostile?"

The census taker looked up from his writing. He was a man of

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ordinary size, plainly dressed, with green eyes and an abundance of freckles.

"The work has only begun," he answered, "and this is my first time. However, it is not a good year to be doing it. There are many who think it a waste of the government's money. They prefer to put it off another ten years."

Uncle Abner pulled at his brown beard. "I wonder if they are the same persons who are greedy for every penny of foreign money they can borrow to spend on some wild, shaky investment?"

The census man shrugged. "I'm unable to answer that. There was such talk in Wheeling, where I live, but it was rumored to have come from Washington."

Both Abner and my father snorted.

"However, I had scarcely begun to work in this county when I encountered the strangest opposition I have ever heard," McHenry went on.

"In this county you might hear anything," my father remarked. "What was it?"

McHenry arranged his papers neatly. "Are you acquainted with two families named Stoneman and Bowers?"

"We know who they are," Abner replied. "I am not acquainted with Jonathan Bowers, but Abel Stoneman's cattle have sometimes been in the same droves with mine."

Although she was not a small woman, my mother was following the conversation with the attentiveness of a sparrow. "The Stoneman family is a large one," she said.

"Then you know that these two families are the total population of a small hollow in the southwest part of the county," McHenry said. "I intended to list them among the first, for convenience. As it was, I did not even get to see them."

"What prevented you?" Abner asked.

"Abel Stoneman. He was sitting on a horse at the mouth of the hollow when I arrived. He had guessed who I was, and he refused to let me pass. He said that both families wished not to be counted in the census."

He had our attention. Even I, who had almost no concept of the many interests of our national government—I was only ten—wondered at the thought of its being challenged by anyone.

"Did he give a reason?" my uncle queried.

"He did. He reminded me that King David numbered his people and angered the Lord. In punishment, seventy thousand Israelites

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died before David's atonement was accepted. With this bad year upon us, these two families fear that it might happen again. They want to avoid the Lord's wrath if it does."

It was clear that Abner had not expected an answer like this. He was thoughtful. "What did you say then?" he asked.

Before McHenry could speak, there was a sound of hoofs and wheels. They slowed to a stop before the house, and I ran to see who had come.

"It's Squire Randolph's gig," I called back from the doorway.

"Then I'll let him tell you the rest," McHenry said. "I only told Stoneman that I'd have to think on his refusal. When I returned here, I took the problem to Squire Randolph."

Randolph came to the door blotting perspiration from his forehead with a linen handkerchief. He greeted me with his usual effusiveness and seemed especially interested to see McHenry. He sat down carefully, fussing with his coat.

"I came hoping to find Abner, and here you are, too, McHenry," he said. "It will save both of us some time."

He looked around at the rest of us. "Has McHenry told you of the absurd thing he has encountered with the Stoneman and Bowers families?" When we assented, he continued, "Superstition! They'll be burning witches again before we know it!"

"What these families believe is misguided, but it is not superstition," Abner said. "Did you come here to ask me to tell them that it is?"

"No, no," Randolph protested. "I want to discuss something Stoneman has raised, but it might not be related to McHenry's problem."

"What have you done for Stoneman?" my uncle asked.

"I tried to put it in the hands of those who should be of most help. I asked Bronson, then Adam Bird to talk to those people." Randolph turned to McHenry. "Both of them are circuit-riding preachers. Bronson is Calvinist, Bird is Methodist."

"One of them must have failed if you sent two of them," Abner remarked.

"Both of them failed," Randolph said. "Bronson went first. He said he tried to persuade them by pointing out that the people of Israel were numbered after that without coming to harm because of it. They turned him away."

"Bronson is an intelligent man," my father said. "People don't always take to that kind of man."

"Adam Bird is no less so," Uncle Abner said to him. "Bronson tries

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to persuade. Bird attacks sin and will not be turned aside. The two of them are different."

"Nonetheless, Adam Bird could not change their minds, either," Randolph cut in. "He did achieve something, however. They did say that they feared a sin of their own might work against them."

"Did he find out what that sin was?" my father inquired.

"No, even though Bird offered his help, they would not tell."

"It has to be the death of that boy, Isaac Stoneman," my mother said. "Although," she went on, "there's enough sin in how they married off that Bowers child to him, without adding in the boy's death."

McHenry's eyes gleamed with interest, but my uncle had a question for Randolph.

"Did Jonathan Bowers tell Adam Bird that he might talk to McHenry if he were approached separately?"

Randolph considered. "Bird made no mention of such an offer."

"Abel Stoneman is serious in his stewardship," said Abner, "but he is the master—that must never be questioned. His will must be obeyed by his family, his livestock, and his dogs. Some have said he is greedy for power. If that is true, neither Bronson's reasoning nor Bird's emotion could ever change him. If he changed, he would be yielding power to them."

My father looked at him and cleared his throat. "What about Bowers and how he got his land?"

"Rufus, that is only hearsay," my uncle said.

My mother spoke directly to McHenry. "All we know is gossip and rumor. It is a fact that Jonathan and Lydia Bowers and their daughter, Rachel, came to this county only a few months ago. They wanted to buy land, and Jonathan Bowers tried to purchase sixty acres from Abel Stoneman. He could not meet Stoneman's price. But he did get the land."

The census taker leaned forward. "How?"

My mother glanced at the three other men, then went on. "That is not known. There is talk that he got it for consenting to the marriage of his daughter, Rachel, to Abel Stoneman's boy, Isaac."

McHenry shrugged. "That is not unusual."

"No," my mother agreed. "Even at fourteen, Isaac was of legal age. But Rachel Bowers was not. She was only twelve, and her marriage was allowed only by consent."

"Some would say that she has lived a fourth or a third of her life already," said Randolph.

"Your own Betty is well past that," my mother reminded him.

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"Have you thrust marriage upon her?" She looked around again. "Rachel Bowers was only a *child*, and that is where the sin in those two families lies!"

Before anyone could answer, she went on: "To make it worse, they say that the Stoneman boy was every bit as overbearing as his father is. That's no way for a child to begin a life!"

Not one of the four men ventured to answer her. Randolph looked distressed. A widower, he was all too conscious of his responsibilities to his own daughter.

Finally, he nodded toward my mother and spoke to my uncle.

"Abner, I need your help, and it has to do with these very families."

"If neither Bronson nor Bird could persuade them, I would be no better," Abner said.

"That is not it," Randolph replied. "It relates to the land Abel Stoneman gave Isaac and Rachel as a wedding gift. Ten acres. He wants it back."

"Is there a deed on record?"

"There is."

"To the boy alone, or to the two of them?"

"To both of them."

"Then, even though the boy is dead, Abel cannot get it back. Surely you know that better than I," Abner said, with mild rebuke.

"It is more than that," said Randolph, twisting his great carved ring.

"I am sure that you speak in riddles to some of us," my mother interposed. "We may be as ignorant of these things as Mr. McHenry is."

Randolph momentarily seemed taken aback. Then he inclined his head to my mother. "I had no wish to be discourteous. The root of the matter is that the girl, Rachel, killed her husband, and his father witnessed it." He shifted in his chair. "When the boy, Isaac, married the Bowers girl, his father gave them a small house, a barn, and ten acres of land to make a start. Two months ago these children were in the barn just at dusk. The girl was holding a lantern for the boy, and she displeased him in some way. He struck her violently—I have heard that she still bears the mark. In return, she threw the lantern, hitting him. It then fell into the straw at his feet. He was in flames almost at once, and the barn was afire very quickly. Rachel, herself, escaped by running out."

"The boy's father witnessed this?" McHenry inquired.

"He was on his way to see them, and he had almost reached the

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barn when it happened. He rushed to save the boy, but the flames were too fierce."

"What of the livestock?" my father inquired.

"There were two cows and one horse in their stalls," Randolph answered. "The boy was in the center of the barn, and the stock was along the sides. Stoneman got them out unharmed."

"When is the girl to be tried?" McHenry asked.

Randolph seemed distressed. "Perhaps never. And this uncertainty is at the root of Stoneman's determination to get the land again."

"I have heard that the child had a breakdown," Abner said. "Is that true?"

"It is," Randolph acknowledged. "It seems that she has never recovered. How could she be put on trial?"

"They say that she sits in a chair all day, staring," my mother said. "She never speaks, and she seems unaware of anyone."

"And that is Stoneman's argument," Randolph said heavily. "Because of her condition, he says she is incompetent. If that can be established, he will get back the land."

My uncle had been frowning ever since Randolph had described the tragedy. "It is a matter of reality," he said, without addressing anyone.

"You mean, does the girl understand reality?" Randolph asked.

"No," said Abner. "The reality is that Jonathan Bowers had control of seventy acres of land. Sixty acres are his, and he is overseer of ten more for his daughter. Stoneman grudges him the sixty acres, and the thought of the extra ten is intolerable."

"That does not enter into what he has asked of me," Randolph said. "He wants me to have the child's competency investigated. Would you do it?"

Uncle Abner stared in surprise. "I? Surely this is a matter for Storm. He is a doctor. Or Bronson or Adam Bird might judge the thing properly."

"You have had ten years of observing your nephew Martin," Randolph answered. "Your judgment of him has not been as uncritical as his parents' has."

Abner was silent, considering this assessment. Finally he looked at the clock, then he said: "It is a great responsibility. If I accept, I must go at once to the courthouse to inspect the two deeds given by Abel Stoneman. But my acceptance is based on one condition."

"Name it."

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My uncle shook his head. "You are not the one to agree, Randolph." He turned to my mother. "Miriam, I will go tomorrow, but only if you go with me. It may be that your judgment is more reliable than anyone's."

Astonishment and confusion were plain to see on her face, but she quickly composed herself. "Why, Abner—" she began. Then she raised her chin. "Yes. I will go with you."

I watched as Uncle Abner readied our buggy the next morning. I was not permitted to go with him and my mother, but I knew that the trip would be discussed in detail. Besides, it promised to be a warm summer day, and I had other things which interested me more. When the horse was finally hitched, my uncle came into the house. He spoke first to my father.

"Rufus, I studied the deeds that Stoneman gave Bowers and those children. They are clear and uncomplicated. In the deed to Bowers, however, one thing caught my attention. Stoneman reserved the water rights on a small stream."

My father reflected. "He wants to be sure that his cattle will not go thirsty in a dry season."

"Perhaps." Abner turned to my mother. "Miriam, if you are ready—?"

She arose. "I am."

As they went to the porch, Uncle Abner said to my mother, "Miriam, do you recall that Isaiah saw the Lord when King Uzziah died and feared to speak because of an unpurged sin? If you do, you will remember that a seraphim touched his mouth with a live coal and purged that sin, and Isaiah spoke."

She turned her head toward him. "I sense what you mean. Surely you don't intend to burn that child's mouth?"

"No," he answered. "No man should pretend to a power that was not given him. But if you will say to that girl what I suggest to you, her lips might be unsealed."

"Then suggest," she said.

He helped her into the buggy. "We can discuss that as we go. It must be done carefully."

In the hills, hollows take many shapes, depending on the sculpture created by water. The hollow where the Stoneman and Bowers families lived was a broad U. The slopes above the small stream were

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gentle and better suited to farming and grazing than some other locations in the county.

As Abner turned the buggy from the main road into the hollow, he studied what he saw. The head of the hollow was nearly half a mile farther on. A large gray frame house with a wide porch commanded the area from a height of approximately a hundred feet. Several large oaks shaded it from the front. It was flanked by a number of cedars erect as grounded spears. It was Abel Stoneman's house.

Small outbuildings were scattered behind the house, but the barn and stable were along the slope to the left, as one faced it. Orchards, pastures, and crops advanced from the barn along this arm of the U. The center of the other arm was occupied by a small house and the ruins of a burned barn. The outer end of this hillside was the holding of Jonathan Bowers.

Abner had no need to urge the horse to climb a hillside. Bowers' dwelling was at the level of the road, facing south. Stoneman's large house faced east. Bowers had not built new when he bought his land. His was a story-and-a-half log house where Stoneman's family had once lived.

Abner had scarcely pulled the horse to a stop when Bowers came around the side of the building. He was a small wiry man in patched but neat clothing. It was clear that he did not know his visitors.

"If it's Stoneman's you want, you'd best go on," he called to Abner. "This is the Bowers place."

"Then there is no need to go farther," Abner replied. He introduced my mother and himself. "We came to see you and your family."

Bowers looked at him thoughtfully. "Are you more people come about that census matter?"

"No," said Abner. "I have heard of it, but I am not involved."

"Step down, then, and come inside," Bowers said.

The interior of the house had been changed very little since it was built. The main room dominated the entire western end, with no ceiling but the roof. The eastern end had an upper loft for sleeping quarters, reached by a ladder. The hearth and kitchen were under it. A small, summer wash house and the toilet were behind the house, at the end away from the well. A small barn was farther to the right.

When Bowers showed my mother and Uncle Abner through the front door, his wife came out of the kitchen, looking inquiringly at

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her husband. She was much of a pair with him, but more faded and showing more gray in her hair.

Both my uncle and my mother were civil when they were introduced, but their attention was caught by the other person in the main room.

She sat in a cane-bottom rocker, staring out of the front window. The chair never moved. She was dressed all in black. In spite of the heat, the collar of the dress was high at the throat, and the sleeves were long to the end of the wrists. Her mother had done the girl's deep honey-colored hair carefully. It and her staring blue eyes were all the color she had.

Bowers cleared his throat. "Our daughter, Rachel."

My mother leaned toward Lydia Bowers. "Is she always like this?"

"Yes."

Abner looked around. "Does she always look from the same window?"

The girl's mother was surprised. "No. She looks from all of them—except the west one."

Uncle Abner walked to the west window. The view covered the small wedding-gift house and the burned barn. Beyond lay the head of the hollow and the large Stoneman house. He made no comment.

Instead, he turned to Bowers.

"Could we step outside?" he said to the short man. "The women would be more at ease without us."

He drew my mother aside even as Bowers was agreeing. "Speak to her alone, if you can. Tell her the thing I suggested," he said in an undertone. "Also," he added, "try to get her to change her dress."

"Would you show me some of your place?" Abner asked Bowers as they went through the front door again.

"I'm just getting started," Bowers said. "You'll have to overlook much. I only have five cows, two horses, and two pigs. A few chickens."

"Are your cattle for milk or for beef?" my uncle asked.

"A little of both. Mostly for us. Later I want to raise more beef cattle."

"How is your water supply?"

Bowers paused and looked at him. "You have not yet told me why you came here."

"Randolph asked me to come," Abner said. "Stoneman wants the land returned that he gave his son and your daughter as a wedding gift."

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The short man nodded. "I see. Rachel is thirteen now and of legal marriageable age. She has her own rights."

Abner said mildly, "That is not in question, and I suspect you know it."

Bowers sighed. "Yes." He turned away. "You asked about water. Let me show you."

He led the way to where the bed of a small stream wound down the hillside between his land and the small holding Stoneman had given the children. Although the dry part of summer was still weeks away, no water flowed or even remained in small pools in the watercourse.

"This run is dry," Abner said. "What happened to the water?"

"It begins on Stoneman's land," Bowers said. "He diverted the water to make a pond for his son's stock."

"Your own stock needs water," Abner said. "He must have known this when he sold you the land."

Bowers looked at him without expression. "He made no excuse to me when he took away my stream."

Abner looked about. "Your stock are still here. Where do they drink?"

The short man smiled. "I tapped into a spring on my own land and got enough water to supply drinking troughs. Besides, as Rachel's father, I look after her interest in her own property. I can't let that pond go to waste."

"What about your family's needs?"

"We have a well near the house."

Abner considered the other man. "You are not easily defeated, Bowers."

A shadow of a smile came and went on Bowers' face. "Not often. But," he said, nodding toward the house, "I am not one to challenge the justice of the Lord."

Uncle Abner stared along the hillside to the ashes and blackened timbers of the barn. "Nor am I," he said. "But I will stand against any justice wearing false clothing."

He raised his big hand. "Let us go to your daughter's land, Bowers."

As the two walked across the modest pasture toward the small house and the blackened remains of the barn nearby, a man strode up the slope to meet them. He would have filled any ordinary doorway, and he could have been taken for the Devil's brother, so burned was he by wind and sun.

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"Hello, Stoneman," Abner said.

The other man raised his head, and his eyes, black as fresh-cut coal, gleamed.

"Abner. Why have you come to this place?"

Abner took his time in replying. He noted that Stoneman's gray shirtsleeves were rolled up, showing the man's muscular arms furred with coarse black hair. He looked hard at the whip coiled on the man's belt.

"I was asked to come," he answered, finally.

"Is someone interested in buying cattle? Are you to report the worth of my stock? You are known for a fair man." A new thought struck him, and his expression hardened. "Or did that government man send you?"

"My only dealings with McHenry are my own," Abner replied. "I am here to do an appraisal for Randolph."

"An appraisal?" The man hooked a hand in his belt and laughed. "Then you know I want this land back. But—an appraisal? Does Randolph expect me to pay a tribute to the person who has already taken my son's life?"

"No," said Abner. "If your land is returned, the justice of your claim will be acknowledged."

"Then why are you to appraise it? Does someone hope to buy it?"

"It is not the land that I was asked to appraise," replied Abner. "It is the child."

Stoneman looked at him in disbelief. "You? Why, then, I am assured of a favorable decision. You could never be swayed by a pretty face if there is only emptiness behind it."

Abner made no attempt to counter. "My sister-in-law, Miriam, came with me. She is examining the child."

"Then it is her answer that I need."

"It is the answer of both of us that you will get," Uncle Abner said, "but before I can reach mine, I must see your son's barn."

Stoneman shook his head. "The barn? You would need to be Joseph or Daniel, a reader of visions. There is no longer a barn. Even some of the ash has been washed into the ground by the rain."

My uncle spoke calmly. "I know that the spot is one that is most painful for you, Stoneman, and I have no wish to add to that. I am going there, and I ask Bowers to come with me."

The large man would have spoken, but he changed his mind and stood aside. Abner and the short man walked past him to the ruin.

Bowers gestured. "It is still plain how it was built, with the long

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way going along the slope. The stalls were at the ends. Barn doors front and back. Hay loft over the middle section."

Abner studied the charred timbers which lay in disordered heaps at each end of the ruin. "I am told that Stoneman witnessed the start of the fire as he approached along the road. Then the front door must have been open."

"That's true."

"The fire blazed swiftly," Abner went on. "It was so fierce that Stoneman could not reach his son. The boy must have been in the center of the barn. That part is gone completely. The back door must have been open, then."

"That is true," said Stoneman's voice, from behind them. "How did you know?"

Uncle Abner did not turn. "It happened at twilight, I am told."

The large man stepped to his side. "It did."

"At twilight the warm air of the day rises up a slope, and the cool air sinks to lower ground along that same slope. There is usually a breeze. With both barn doors open, this breeze would pass through and fan a fire."

Bowers spoke up. "It was more than a twilight breeze. It was the wind ahead of the rain. The rain came in time to quench the fire at the ends of the barn."

"But not in time to save the boy's life," said Abner. "Were you a witness to this, Bowers?"

"I saw only the last of it. I was out bringing in a stray cow when I saw the blaze and Stoneman driving the stock to safety. Then the rain came. A hard rain."

"Where was your daughter?" Abner asked.

Shame crossed Bowers' face. "She was cowering outside the barn, at the back corner towards our house. She was much as you saw her today."

Abner glanced at the heaps of blackened wood on both sides of him. He turned to Stoneman.

"Was it hard to get the stock out? Did they leave willingly, or did you have to drive them out?"

"A frightened beast does strange things. You are right," the large man answered. "This time they knew what to do when they were turned loose. All the same," he added, "I encouraged them. With this very whip."

Abner looked down at the whip. "I judge that you find that a help in many problems. Might I see it?"

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Stoneman detached the whip from his belt and handed it over. "There is never any doubt when that talks, Abner."

My uncle examined it without uncoiling it. The lash was stout braided leather, with an iron-hard knot at the tip. The butt was nine inches long, two inches across at the base, leather-wrapped, and heavy.

Abner tapped the butt against his palm. "It has a lead core," he remarked.

"Protection," Stoneman replied. "I could stop a bull with it."

"You fear the angel of the Lord, Stoneman," Abner said without emotion. "If he comes to smite you, will you smite him first?"

The large man's tan deepened. He made no answer, but held out his hand for the whip.

Abner seemed not to see the hand. Instead, carrying the whip, he walked to the rubble on the side toward Bowers' house. A dull gleam showed beneath one of the burned timbers.

Stopping in front of the half-visible object, he reversed his hold on the butt of the whip. Grasping the timber with his left hand, he raised it. He raked out the metallic object with the butt of the whip.

It was a four-sided tin lantern.

"That is the lantern the girl threw at Isaac the night of the fire!" Stoneman exclaimed. "I have not seen it since."

Abner carried the lantern and the whip out of the ruin. He wiped the whip clean in the grass and handed it back to Stoneman, then began to examine the lantern.

The light was square-sided and flat-bottomed, with a peaked tip capped by a ring. Openings were cut in the tin sides to let light out. One side was a hinged door, firmly latched.

Abner unlatched this door and looked inside. In the center of the bottom was a candle holder. Around its base were a few blobs of hardened wax. There was no candle, nor even the stump of one.

He turned to Stoneman. "Soot and ash must have concealed this from you, and the rain has washed it clean enough to reveal it again. Do you want to look at it?"

"Not even once!" the large man snarled. "It cost my boy his life. Better if the fire had melted it down to shapeless metal!"

Abner studied him. "Yes, Stoneman, I agree with you. It should have been melted."

He turned away.

"Now, let us all go to Bowers' house and determine what to say to Randolph." . . .

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Lydia Bowers, her daughter Rachel, and my mother were still seated in the same room when the men returned. There was one difference: the girl was wearing a dress better suited to summer, but she had a shawl around her shoulders. The ends were drawn down to cover her arms.

Abner introduced Stoneman to my mother, then all three men seated themselves. My uncle rested the lantern on his knee.

Stoneman looked around the room, then addressed Uncle Abner. "Now I am to hear what you will suggest to Randolph, am I? You must find in my favor. I see nothing changed here."

Uncle Abner turned to my mother. "Were you successful, Miriam?" he asked.

She gave him a grave smile. "In every way."

"Then I can summarize for both of us."

He now looked at the girl's father. "Bowers, from the moment you found your daughter cowering outside the barn until now, has she ever spoken?"

The short man shook his head. "Not one word. She has been unable to feed herself or care for herself in any way."

Stoneman interrupted. "She was cursed by God for what she did. She will never be able to care for that land again."

"You speak strong words," Abner said. "I am reminded of the man of old who said that death and life are in the power of the tongue. I think that I must test the truth of that."

He looked directly at the girl. "Rachel. My sister-in-law is a good woman, and she has never spoken anything but the truth. I know that she told you something. I am here to tell you to believe her."

Stoneman interrupted once more. "Have you been trying to put words into that girl's mouth, Abner?"

"If I am to believe you and Bowers, that would be impossible," my uncle said. "You say she is cursed and unable to speak." He addressed the girl again. "Is that true, Rachel?"

For the first time the girl blinked and color came into her cheeks. Her lips parted. Her voice came, at first a withered and unused thing.

"That—that is not true. I have always been able to speak."

Amazement and shock were plain on the faces of Bowers and Stoneman.

Uncle Abner held up his great hand. "There is much you have to tell, but I must ask you to be quiet for a while. I must talk to your father."

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"Bowers," he said, "I have read the deed Stoneman gave you for your land. What is set down is simple and uncomplicated. I want you to tell me what was not set down."

The short man appeared to be still dazed. "Not set down? What do you mean?"

"I have heard rumors of an unwritten bargain," Abner replied patiently. "It is for you to confirm it or deny it."

Bowers turned uncomfortably in his chair. "I don't know what you heard, so I'd best tell you what did happen. Stoneman's boy wanted to marry Rachel, but she wasn't of age. Stoneman offfered me the land at a price I could pay if we'd consent to the marriage."

Stoneman's thick eyebrows drew together. "There was nothing illegal or underhanded about that, Abner. I remind you that Bowers' land is not the issue."

"It would not seem to be," said Abner. "For now, let me only remark that, no matter how you clothe the act, you bought your son a wife."

"And a sour bargain it was!"

"Bowers," my uncle went on, "in his deed to you, Stoneman reserved the water rights. You have shown me how he has exercised those rights. Your stream bed is dry."

"Did you see what I did?" Stoneman barked. "I used that water to make a pond for my boy's stock. I was entitled to do that."

"You were," Abner agreed, "although you could have diverted only half of the flow and let Bowers use the rest. You are not a compassionate man, Stoneman."

"My own come first," the large man growled. "When my other children need help, they'll get it, too."

"Perhaps I deny you credit," Abner said. "We are told that this girl has sinned. You would seem to accept this sin as your family's, also."

"It is a responsibility older than any of us," Stoneman said.

"You know what you do," my uncle observed. "Before we leave, I believe that it will be known to all of us."

Then his tone changed. "I am told that you are a harsh man, Stoneman, that it is your will, and only yours, that holds good, even down to the least creature on your land."

Stoneman drew himself up. "Have you ever known me to deal in any livestock that a man would be ashamed to offer another man? Are my cattle gaunt? Can you count the ribs on my pigs?"

"That has never been said of you."

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The large man's hand rested on the butt of his whip. "The Lord gave man dominion over every living thing, and I live by that!"

"In all things?"

"In all things!"

Abner turned to the girl, and his tone changed. "Rachel, there are other rumors to lay to rest. You were married to Isaac. There are stories that he was a bully. Is this true?"

Her eyes flashed. "That is not true. He was always kind to me. I loved him."

"Loved him!" Stoneman snapped. "A strange love that takes the life of the other. You can speak, girl, but it is a mad thing speaking!"

Abner's voice was quiet, but it commanded attention. "Rachel, what did Miriam say to you that unsealed your lips?"

She kept her gaze fixed on her father-in-law. "She told me that you would give me your word that my father could not legally be forced to return his land."

"But I did not ask for his land!" The large man shouted. "I only want back the land I gave my son!"

"Do you?" said Abner. "Rachel, it is time now to tell what happened on the evening of the fire." Seeing her hesitate, he said, "It is better to tell the truth."

She sat up straight and began to grow into a woman. "It was getting dark fast, and Isaac said that rain was coming. He was tired and thought he had dropped his awl in the barn, when he was working on some harness. He asked me to light the lantern and hold it while he looked for the awl.

"When we got inside the barn, we found his father there. He had been examining the cows and the horses, and he was not pleased. He began shouting at Isaac, saying he was neglecting his animals. It wasn't the way he'd been taught. Isaac tried to answer, but his father slapped him to the floor. He uncoiled that whip and was going to use it. I couldn't stand that, and I held the lantern in his face.

"Then he stepped back and lashed me around the neck and shoulders with the whip. I fainted and fell to the floor.

"I heard Isaac shouting, and I opened my eyes again. The lantern still burned, but it was beside me, and the rest of the barn was dim. I am certain that Isaac was fighting his father. Then that man reversed his whip and struck down Isaac with the butt."

"Isaac was fighting because of you?" Abner asked.

"Yes. I know he was struck down, because I fainted with fear. The next I knew, I heard the door of the lantern being opened. I saw that

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man reach down and take out the candle. He closed the lantern again and dropped it. Then he tossed the candle into a heap of straw in the middle of the floor.

"I didn't know what was under that straw until it blazed up. When I saw, I got to my feet and tried to drag Isaac out, but I only got burns on my arms, and I couldn't do it.

"But *he* was still there, getting the livestock out. When he was finished, he came back and pulled me from the building. Then he said, 'It was an accident that killed my boy. If you tell any other story, I'll take everything your father owns.'

"He walked away and left me there in the rain.

"I knew what must have happened. I loved Isaac, but I couldn't bring him back. I love my father, too, and I couldn't see him ruined. I started to pretend to be what you saw."

Stoneman leaped to his feet. "She is possessed! No sane child would accuse a father of burning his own son to death!"

"Let us expose that unclean spirit, then," said Abner, his voice grim. "Rachel, remove your shawl and lay it in your lap."

Slowly the girl slipped away the shawl, exposing her neck and the tops of her shoulders.

Abner arose and bent over her.

"Stoneman, see this scar across her left shoulder and around her neck. It will match the end of your whip. Look—here is where the knot tore the skin."

The dark man's rage was tempered. "Very well, Abner. I did give her a taste of the lash, when I found that she had cost my boy his life."

"After you tried to drag him from the fire?"

"Yes."

Uncle Abner touched the girl's shoulder. "Lift your arms, child."

She raised her arms, showing the ugly, tortured flesh of recent burns.

"She has said she tried to drag your son from the fire, but only burned her arms. I see burns on her arms," Abner said, pointing. "Where are your scars, Stoneman?"

"I was wearing a heavy shirt, and it protected me," Stoneman replied.

He started toward the door, then paused. "I see that you have made up your mind against me, but if you try to spread this pack of lies, I'll drive you into the ground!"

"That you will not!" Abner thundered. "Her story fits all the way.

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The lead in your whip would kill an ox. What chance would it give a young boy? You killed him, whether you meant it or not. Then you burned his body to conceal the wound, and you tried to place the burden on a child.

"Saddle up, and ride in to confess to Randolph!"

"I refuse your wild demand, Abner," Stoneman said grimly. "It is a saner tale that she threw the lantern when my boy slapped her than the one the two of you have patched together."

"It would be," said Abner, "but for one thing. You overlook the lantern."

He lifted it from his side, where he had dangled it.

"I found the lantern, not in the middle of the ruin, where the fire was hottest, but at one end, where the rain saved part of the timbers."

Stoneman's lip curled. "It was kicked there by a cow or the horse."

"It is also where this girl could have fallen. That is only one thing. Where is the candle?"

Again Stoneman was disdainful. "It was consumed by the fire."

"Yes," said Abner, as though considering it, "a fire as hot as it must have been would have consumed the candle.

"But," he said, and the other man seemed to shrink as he spoke, "you will stand before Randolph unless you can explain why so hot a fire did not warp or melt the tin of the lantern. Explain, if you can, why so hot a fire did not also consume these blobs of wax in the bottom of the lantern!

"Stoneman, I can understand why you refuse to be counted. The Preacher said it better than I:

"That which is wanting cannot be numbered."

"Q"

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a *NEW* short story by

JOYCE HARRINGTON

Brenda Sullivan always won, and Michael Devlin always lost. And therein lies our tale. And when Brenda won a brand-new, spanking, shining, snug-and-cozy mobile home, Michael could not contain his envy. "He decided to risk all on one throw of the dice"—figuratively speaking. . .

HONEYMOON HOME

by JOYCE HARRINGTON

Brenda Sullivan had all the luck. She won turkeys and television sets and trips to tropical islands in the off-season. If there was a raffle for a worthy cause, you can bet Brenda had bought a chance. Just one. Some folks would buy whole books of chances at ten dollars a throw to repair the organ at St. Xavier's or send the orphan kids at Holy Innocents to summer camp. Not Brenda. One chance was all she ever bought, and it was always a winner.

It wasn't that she was stingy. Oh, no. She gave away most of what she won, because as she said, "Now, what do I want with two television sets when I've only got one pair of eyes?" And it wasn't that she scorned good works; nobody in the parish did more to help the sick and the needy. Wasn't she always cooking up nourishing beef broth for poor old Mr. Feeney who was feeble and neglected by his own wild daughters? And wasn't she always reading *True Confessions* to poor blind Genevieve Collins who wept with delight over the sad tales she heard?

No. It was a matter of principle with Brenda. "It's really gambling, isn't it?" she would say to the urchins who rang her doorbell with grubby raffle books in their fists. "And gambling is wrong." She made them sweat for their single dollar bill, presenting them with

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a moral dilemma that even the sainted Aquinas would have difficulty resolving. All the poor kids could do was mutter, "Please, miss. It's for the church. And you could win a transistor radio." Or a lace tablecloth. Or a side of beef. Or a mobile home.

Michael Devlin had no luck at all. Ever since he'd learned the feel of the cards between his fingers in the schoolyard at Our Lady of Sorrows, he'd been losing his lunch money, his paper-route money, his earnings as a box boy at the A & P after school, and finally his tips and salary as a taxi driver and part-time hearse chauffeur for Brenda's father, Thomas F. X. Sullivan, the undertaker.

It was a sad day, indeed, when Michael Devlin discovered the race track. He was fourteen years old and went to Belmont with his mother's brother, Black Harry Hennigan. Michael's uncle had earned his nickname because of his thick curly black hair and his thick curving black eyebrows and his thick brushy black mustache, and because of the black-hearted way he treated his women. Young Michael idolized Black Harry and looked like a fair imitation of him with a faint black down sprinkling his upper lip and his blue eyes dripping with melancholy whenever the occasion warranted. But Black Harry won more than he lost, and there the resemblance ended. Michael came home broke from that first trip to the track, and from every trip he made over the next ten years.

Michael's father tried to beat it out of him, but only once. Michael was tall and strong and after the first blow he simply picked his father up, set him on top of the refrigerator, and said, "Don't hit me, Pop. It won't do any good."

His mother cried, but that didn't do any good, either. He wiped away her tears, kissed her on top of the head, and said, "I'll win next time, Ma, and I'll buy you a fur coat to keep you warm in the winter." His blue eyes swam at the memory of last winter and all the winters before that she'd shivered through in her old gray cloth coat with the mismatched buttons down the front. But blue eyes and good intentions aren't enough, and the closest Michael Devlin ever came to warming his mother's heart was the time someone left a pair of rabbit-fur mittens in the back of his cab. They were too small.

But even though he had no luck, Michael Devlin always bought a whole book of chances whenever the raffle-ticket sellers came around. Even if he had to borrow ten dollars from his mother. "It's a gamble, isn't it?" he would say. "And who knows, I might win. What's the grand prize this time? A mobile home, is it? Now that's

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really grand. I could drive it out to Las Vegas and come home a millionaire." He bought four books of chances.

When Brenda Sullivan won the mobile home, the whole neighborhood turned out to celebrate. She parked it on the street right out in front of her father's funeral parlor and let everyone take a tour through it, marveling at the cunning fixtures and the wonderful coziness of it. Her mother served tea and cookies from a table set up just inside the funeral parlor with sheafs of gladioli standing in urns in the corners, while in the garage next door, where the two shining hearses were polished and pampered, there were kegs of beer and bottles of good whiskey for the men.

"Ah, Brenda," said Father Kiely, whose teacup was brimming with Jameson's, "that's a fine machine. You can travel the whole world with that and never have to take your chances in a foreign hotel. You could even take it on a pilgrimage to Lourdes."

Brenda giggled. "But, Father, I couldn't drive it across the ocean. And anyway, I'm not sick."

"Ah, but haven't you heard of miracles?" said the priest, sipping at his teacup and leaving it somewhat unclear whether driving across the Atlantic or contracting an incurable disease to justify the trip was the more miraculous.

At the back of the garage Michael Devlin scowled over his paper cup of beer. His mustache now rivaled that of his uncle, Black Harry, and his shining curls swept the collar of his sky-blue shirt. "I should have won," he muttered to Denny O'Donnell crouched on the bench beside him. "Four stinkin' books of chances I bought. Forty dollars down the drain. Forty times my name should have come up. And I didn't even get second or third prize."

"Ah, forget it," said Denny. "What would you do with a set of crummy dishes? And who wants to eat dinner for two at Costello's Bar and Grill? You'd have to pay me to eat there."

"That's not the point," fumed Michael. "I should have won the mobile home. What's that pie-faced girl gonna do with it? Drive it full of mourners to the cemetery behind her oily old man? I could have done wonders with it. You and me, Denny, we could have really gone places with it. Vegas, Hialeah, even down to Tiajuana to see the bullfights. And think of the girls we could have picked up along the way. College girls. Showgirls. Even some of those Texas cowgirls. It makes me sick." He drained the beer in his cup and wiped his mustache on the back of his hand.

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"You've got the keys to the garage," said Denny. "You could steal it."

"Don't think I haven't thought of that," said Michael, lowering his voice. "But with my luck I'd get caught before I ever got as far as New Jersey. That Brenda Sullivan has all the luck. And she doesn't even know how to use it."

"You could marry it," said Denny. "In fact, if you don't, maybe I will."

"What? What are you gabbling about? It's that mobile home I want. Not a wife."

"That's what I mean. Marry Brenda Sullivan and you get the machine as part of the deal. Think about it while I get us another beer."

Michael Devlin thought. Brenda Sullivan was skinny and freckled as far as the eye could see. She was about the same age as Michael, twenty-four, and as far as he knew, no one had ever made her an offer of marriage. That tagged her an old maid and likely to remain one. Whereas he, Michael, was much too young to be thinking about marrying. There were too many card games yet to be played, too many rolls of the dice, too many races to be bet on. A wife would only cut into his gambling time, wanting to be taken here and there, wanting him home for dinner, wanting his hard-earned money to be spent on clothes and furniture instead of making it possible for him to win the big one at last. And, God forbid, what if there were children? No, no, no! Michael shook his head morosely.

And yet there was the mobile home. Michael craved it with all his being. He yearned for it. He lusted after it.

Brenda came into the garage carrying a plate of sandwiches. The men gathered around the beer kegs ignored her. All but Denny O'Donnell. He oozed up to her, grinning and bobbing like a cat sneaking up on a bowl of cream, and took a sandwich from her plate. From the back of the garage Michael watched the two of them, Denny laying on the charm and Brenda taking it all in with a serious look on her freckled mug. Michael shuddered. If he didn't do something, quick, his best friend would be driving off with the prize before you could say daily double. He got up, smoothed his hair over his ears, and ambled forward.

Brenda looked up as he approached. She was short as well as skinny, and Michael, from his great height, fixed his gaze somewhere over her head. "Ah, Denny," he drawled, "whatever happened to those beers you went in search of? Oh, hello, Brenda." He dropped

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his eyes to her left shoulder as if just discovering that she was there beneath his nose.

"Hello, Michael," she said. "Have a sandwich. Denny was just telling me how grand it would be to take the Boys Club to Jones Beach in the mobile home. He volunteered to come along to keep them orderly."

"Denny's a wonder with those roughnecks. I'm sure he'll keep them from writing graffiti all over those nice clean walls." Michael grabbed a sandwich and chomped at it while trying to smile down at Brenda through the ham and cheese.

"But I was thinking of donating it to the convent. The sisters' station wagon is ten years old and can't last much longer."

"I'll go get those beers now," said Denny. He swiveled away and leered at Michael from behind Brenda's back.

"That's a grand idea," said Michael. "The sisters can take wonderful vacations in it. I can see them now, camped by the side of a woodland lake, fishing in the morning, swimming in the heat of the day, singing the dear old songs by the light of the moon."

"Well, maybe not," said Brenda, "but I honestly don't know what to do with it myself."

"You could go on a trip. You could drive it all the way to California."

"Alone? I'd be afraid." Brenda looked up at Michael expectantly. Her eyes were yellowish under sparse, sandy lashes.

Michael gazed up at the ceiling of the garage as if his future lay obscured in its dim high corners. "You're looking pretty today, Brenda," he mumbled.

"I am?" she said. "That never happened before."

"You look pretty every day. I guess I never told you before."

"No, you never did. But you used to write 'Brenda is an ugly cow' on the blackboard at school."

Michael blushed. "It was because . . . because I liked you." God forgive me for the lie, he thought.

"God forgive you for the lie," said Brenda. "Anyway, come and see the inside of the mobile home. Before I give it away."

She put the plate of sandwiches down on the table between the beer kegs, and strode on her short skinny legs out of the garage and into the sunlight of the street. In the bright light her pinkish fuzzy hair looked like an old dustmop.

Michael gulped his sandwich down and followed. Denny smirked

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at him and gave him the victory sign. Michael gritted his teeth and wondered if he could go through with it.

Out on the street the crowd of neighbors was still milling about the wonderful machine. Brenda shooed the gawkers out and stood waiting in the narrow doorway of the mobile home. Across the street Marlene Kelly lounged on her stoop, her long legs in tight jeans sprawled invitingly, her scarlet lips pouted in the creamy oval of her face. "Going on a trip, Michael?" she called out to him.

Michael ducked his head and tried to make himself invisible as he followed Brenda into the mobile home. When she closed the door behind them, he pretended not to notice but occupied himself with inspecting the miniature kitchen facilities. "Oh, it's wonderful," he crooned, "the way they put it all together so everything fits so snug and neat."

Outside, the neighbors kept on chattering, but each pair of eyes found occasion to glance at the closed door and peer at the curtained window. Mrs. Flynn, who always said what she thought, said to Mrs. Grady, "Now, wouldn't a thing like that be just the thing for a honeymoon?"

In the mobile home, Michael felt a small hand take hold of his own. He didn't pull away.

"Come and see the bedroom," said Brenda. "It isn't very big, but it's big enough for two."

Michael felt that things were quickly getting out of control, but he followed along obediently. The more he saw of the mobile home, the more he wanted it. And if he had to take Brenda Sullivan in order to get it, well, that was just one of the breaks of the game. At least, he'd know that she wouldn't be out having a good time while he was traveling from race track to race track in the mobile home. Not like that Marlene Kelly who really gave him heart palpitations with her long legs and her red lips and her long blonde hair. Say, wouldn't it be grand if he could have the mobile home *and* Marlene Kelly? She'd be great fun to be traveling around with.

"What's wrong, Michael?" came a voice from beside him. "Your hand is all clammy and your face is getting red."

"Ah, it's nothing, nothing at all." He looked down at Brenda Sullivan and decided to risk all on one throw of the dice. "It's just that, well, you know, well, being here like this with you, well, it just makes a man sweat. That's all."

Brenda stared at him, waiting.

"What I'm trying to say is, well, I've liked you a long time and,

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well, you're a fine young woman, and you'll make somebody a fine wife, so why don't we?"

"Do you love me, Michael?"

"Ah, now what kind of a question is that?" He gazed around the interior of the mobile home, taking in the clever little cupboards and the tiny bathroom and the cozy little table with its built-in benches. "Would I be asking you to marry me if I didn't?"

Brenda stood on tiptoe and raised her face to be kissed. Michael brushed her freckled cheek with dry lips.

"Let's go talk to my father," she said.

Thomas F. X. Sullivan wasn't delighted. He'd hoped for something finer for his only child, a man who could carry on the business and look after Brenda properly and be both friend and son to him in his declining years. But Brenda had told him years before that she had no intention of marrying an undertaker. Not that she scorned her father's profession. No. What she told him was this: "Michael Devlin is the only man for me. If I can't have him, I won't have anyone." And no amount of arguing had ever changed her mind.

Now here she was dragging Michael behind her into the garage where her father presided over the beer kegs and the Jameson's, and mortifying him before all the men by her bare-faced announcement.

"Michael and I are getting married."

The men fell silent. Michael hung his head, waiting for the objections he felt sure would rain down upon him. Thomas F. X. Sullivan stared at the two of them for a long thoughtful moment. Then he filled a shot glass with whiskey, passed it to Michael, and said, loud and clear, "Good luck to the two of you."

Michael tossed back his shot and submitted sheepishly to the well-wishing and bawdy jokes of the men, while Brenda scampered off to tell her mother the good news. Denny O'Donnell slithered up and winked broadly.

"I knew you could do it," he whispered. "When do we leave for Las Vegas?"

"Hush, now," said Michael, "we'll talk about that later. Get me another shot, will you?"

The honeymoon started on a fine day in June with Michael behind the wheel of the mobile home and Brenda, now Mrs. Devlin, pottering around in the kitchen with last-minute supplies for the trip. The neighbors had gathered in force to see them off, with Mrs. Flynn

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saying to one and all, "Didn't I see it coming? Didn't I say there'd be a honeymoon? It's the second sight I've got."

Marlene Kelly had sauntered across the street, dressed for the summer day in tight cut-off jeans and a pink knit tube top that looked ready to burst, and kissed Michael goodbye thoroughly and shamelessly in front of everyone. "We had some good times, didn't we, Michael, dear?" she murmured in her husky imitation of Bette Midler. "But don't expect me to be waiting around when you get tired of Brenda the Bat."

"Not so loud," Michael cautioned, trying to turn her embrace into a handshake. "I'll be back. Don't do anything permanent."

Denny O'Donnell's wedding present was an oversized pair of fuzzy dice to hang in the wide windshield of the mobile home. "To bring you luck," he said, "and remind you that we've got a date in Vegas when this honeymoon business is over. What's the odds you come back alone?"

"What do you mean?" asked Michael, who was far more innocent than he pretended to be.

"Ah, you know. A little accident on a lonely road, honeymoon comes to a tragic end, bridegroom weeps buckets over corpse of lovely young wife. You read it in the papers every day."

"I never read the papers, except the sports page. I couldn't do a thing like that. I wouldn't know how."

"You'll figure it out," Denny assured him. "It's the only way."

They drove out over the Verrazano Bridge, heading for the Jersey shore as their first stop. The sunlight glistened on the ships in the Narrows, while far up the bay the towers of Manhattan shimmered like a cloud city, full of wonder.

Michael brooded over the wheel. "How many people do you think have jumped off this bridge since it was built?"

"Don't be morbid, Michael," his bride admonished him. "This is the happiest day of my life. I don't want to be thinking about poor miserable suicides."

"Are you sure you don't want to stop at Atlantic City?"

"Sure I'm sure. There's nothing to do there but gamble. I want to go where there's just you and me and the ocean. We'll eat clams and swim and lie on the beach. And at night, well, there'll be just you and me."

"Yeah. Sounds wonderful."

Michael began to dwell on Denny's suggestion that he come back from the trip alone. He glanced at Brenda sitting beside him in the

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passenger seat. She sure didn't get any prettier. She was wearing a lavender blouse that clashed with her freckles and a full navy-blue skirt that failed to disguise the fact that she had no hips at all. She might as well have been wearing a parochial-school uniform. And her bare legs were not only freckled but sprouted sandy fuzz on top of the ugly orange blotches. He thought of Marlene Kelly's smooth white skin and tasted once again on his lips the sweetness of her candy-flavored lipstick. Maybe he could arrange for Brenda to eat a bad clam.

By evening they'd reached a stretch of shore that was lonely enough to suit Brenda. The gray ocean lapped listlessly on a forlorn beach strewn with rubble and beer cans. Michael parked the mobile home next to the crumbling foundation of what had once been a fairly large building.

"I wonder what this was," he mused. "It gives me the shivers. Do you suppose it was haunted and that's why they left it to fall apart?"

"Don't be silly. You're as bad as an old woman with your superstitions. Don't you know they have hurricanes in this part of the world? It probably got blown down in one of those. I'm going in for a swim. Are you coming?"

Michael averted his eyes while Brenda changed into her modest one-piece bathing suit, and thought of Marlene Kelly sunning herself on the rooftop in a pink bikini that left little to the imagination. When Marlene turned over to get the sun on her back, she untied the strap and lay there with her grand full bosom pressing against the towel on the tarry roof. If the house caught fire, she'd have to get up and run for it with everything bare and bouncing in the sun. Brenda's voice cut into his reverie.

"Are you coming or are you just going to stand there like a moon-calf?"

Brenda's bathing suit was black, and what with the orange of her freckles and the yellow of her eyes and the pinkish frizz on top of her head, Michael began thinking of Halloween and witches and all manner of ugly things. He sighed and went into the tiny bathroom to change into his swimming trunks, pretending he was too shy to let Brenda see him taking off his clothes.

They went down to the water, Brenda having locked the mobile home and slung the key on a chain around her neck, and Michael plunged in with a great splash and a whoop. He struck out for the deep, flailing and wallowing like a great white porpoise, playful and eager. When he flipped over onto his back to float for a bit, he looked

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toward the shore and saw Brenda timidly paddling around in the shallow water.

"Come on!" he called out. "It's great fun!"

"I can't," she whimpered back. "I can't swim."

Lights flashed in Michael's brain and Denny's voice came back to him. "You'll figure it out." Would it be so easy? Would he gain the mobile home and lose a wife on the first day out? All he'd have to do was hold her under the water for a couple of minutes and the world would be his. Simple. He swam back.

Brenda stood in water up to her knees, shivering.

"Come on now, darlin'," Michael coaxed. "I'll teach you how to swim. It's easy. But you've got to come in a little deeper."

"I'm afraid," Brenda whispered. "Aren't there sharks?"

"Now who's being silly and superstitious? Whoever heard of a shark in New Jersey?" Michael took her hand and began drawing her into the deeper water.

"But there's no lifeguard," Brenda protested.

"Well, isn't there me? Would I let you drown?"

When the water had reached Brenda's shoulders, Michael said, "Now just lie down in the water as if it were our own cozy bed and I'll hold you up and pretty soon you'll be swimming like a mermaid."

Brenda giggled and let herself fall backward onto Michael's strong arms. Her wet hair darkened and clung to her skull in wriggling ringlets. To Michael they looked like worms. He pulled his arms away and Brenda went under. He groped for her shoulders to make sure she stayed under. At that moment a piercing pain gripped his right big toe. He howled in agony and forgot about Brenda. He kicked and splashed and hopped about in the water. The pain went away, leaving a dull ache.

Brenda came up spluttering. "What happened?" she gasped.

"I don't know," Michael muttered. "I think I got bit by a crab or something."

"Poor Michael," Brenda crooned. "Are you going to teach me some more? That was kind of fun."

"Not now. Maybe tomorrow." He strode away through the water leaving Brenda to follow.

It was luck, he brooded, sheer dumb luck. Just the kind of luck he'd always had. Nothing ever went right. Well, he'd just have to try again another day, another way, and hope that his luck would change. Anyway, the sun was going down, the air was turning cold, he was hungry, and his toe still hurt.

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Brenda splashed along behind him, admiring his broad back and the way his wet black curls lay flat against his neck. She was eager to soothe him and pamper him and feed him and lie with him beside her in the narrow bunk and only the sound of the ocean to be heard between their love murmurs. She considered herself a very lucky woman.

They trudged up the beach, shivering under their wet towels. The mobile home gleamed a welcome in the setting sun.

"I'm so glad we carry our home around with us," said Brenda. "Be sure and shake the sand off your feet." She reached for the key on the chain around her neck.

Two bruisers in leather jackets came around from behind the machine, grinning and flexing their fingers.

"Don't you know you're trespassing?" said one.

"Trespassing!" said the other. "They're breaking the law. We'll just have to impound this heap." He reached for the key that still hung around Brenda's neck.

"Get away from me!" she cried, and slapped his hand away.

"Ow, ain't it a little scrapper, Jack! I think she broke my hand." He waved his hand under Brenda's nose in a mockery of pain, letting his loose fingers whip across her lips until they drew blood.

"Hey!" roared Michael. "Cut that out!"

"Oh, cut that out," sneered the one called Jack in a simpering tone. "What is it you want me to cut out?" A wicked-looking flick knife appeared suddenly in his hand. "I love cutting things out. My dear old Ma always said I should have been a doctor. Suppose I start on her? You keep an eye on him, Billy."

He flourished the knife toward Brenda, who stood frozen, staring at the blade which shone red in the last rays of the setting sun. His partner, Billy, edged around toward Michael, a length of heavy chain dangling from his fist.

"Just give us the keys," he said, "and maybe I can get Jack's mind off playing doctor. You wouldn't like to see what's left after he finishes an operation."

The sound that came from Michael's throat was more animal than human. It was the enraged roar of a lion whose pride has been invaded, the bellow of the bull elephant whose supremacy has been challenged. While the two bullies stood startled at the sound, Michael whipped his wet towel around the knife in Jack's hand and gave him a hard right that landed flush on his jaw.

Before Jack hit the ground, Michael whirled and grabbed the end

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of the chain that was flying through the air toward his head. He tugged it, pulling Billy off balance, and in two swift snaky movements Michael had wrapped the chain around Billy's neck. Billy's eyes bulged as he sank to his knees. Jack lay unconscious at Brenda's feet.

"Open the door, darlin'," said Michael, "and let's be going."

Brenda, her yellow eyes shining with the light of battle, hurried to obey. "Do you think we ought to run over them a couple of times?" she asked.

"No," said Michael. "They're shamed enough. I wouldn't want to have *that* on my conscience."

As they drove away down the twilit road, Brenda put her small freckled hand on Michael's thigh. "You saved my life," she said.

"I did that, didn't I?" he answered proudly, surprised at the warm glow that spread and tingled throughout his body. Even Brenda's freckles didn't look so ugly. "Let's find a trailer camp and settle down for the night. I'm hungry."

It wasn't until much later, when Brenda was sleeping curled in the curve of his body, that the thought came to him. What if I hadn't jumped in when I did? Would they have really killed Brenda? Now I'll never know. But I couldn't let them get off with the mobile home, could I? She thinks I saved her life. Well, I guess I did. And now that I did, how can I take it away from her? It's an awful conundrum. I wish Denny had kept his big mouth shut. But anyway, I'm glad she's okay.

In the darkness of their bunk he reached over and stroked her cheek. Her skin was soft to his fingers and he couldn't see her freckles at all. He sighed and drifted off to sleep.

Two weeks later the honeymooners returned to the neighborhood. The story of their adventures kept tongues clacking for months afterward. How Brenda disturbed a rattlesnake's nest in the Adirondacks and Michael killed the angry snake with one blow of a shovel. How Brenda almost choked to death on a chicken bone in Pennsylvania and Michael administered the Heimlich maneuver. How Brenda fell from a cliff where she had climbed to pick wildflowers, right into Michael's waiting arms. And, of course, the story of the two bullies on the Jersey shore. In the telling, Brenda always smiled lovingly at Michael and said, "I guess I'm just lucky."

Denny O'Donnell was the only one who wasn't entranced by the harrowing adventures. "You blew it," he scolded Michael privately.

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"Not once, not twice. Four times you could have been shut of her. And you blew it."

"Five," said Michael.

"Five!" Denny exploded.

"I tried. But I couldn't do it. A crab bit my toe."

"A crab! Well, now I've heard it all. How are we going to get to Las Vegas like you promised? And what about poor Marlene Kelly who's been pining and wasting away for you like an old dishrag?"

"Marlene never pined for anybody in her life. I saw her looking healthy in the candy store this morning."

"Would you like me to do it for you, Michael? What's a friend for if he can't help out in time of need? I could just drop her in the Gowanus Canal."

The roar that came out of Michael's mouth was the same one that was last heard on the Jersey shore. "You keep away from my wife, Denny O'Donnell, or I'll break off your arm and stuff it down your throat!"

"Okay, okay," Denny whined. "But couldn't we at least drive down to Atlantic City?"

"No," said Michael. "Brenda wouldn't like it. And besides, I'm going to be too busy going to undertaker school. It's a fine profession and you don't need luck to make a go of it."

Now, when the raffle-ticket sellers come around, Brenda and Michael each buy one ticket apiece. Brenda seldom wins any more, but Michael often does. And he likes to tell her, "My luck changed when I married you, darlin', but I wouldn't want to stretch it."

"Q"

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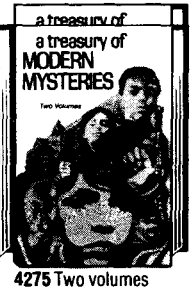

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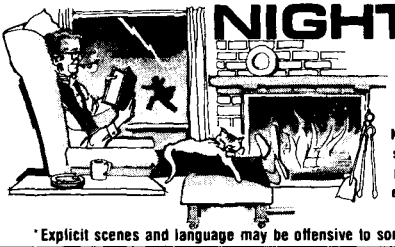

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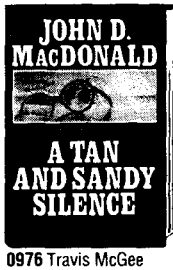

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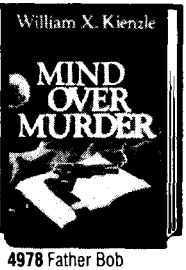

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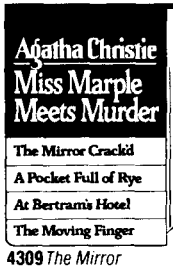

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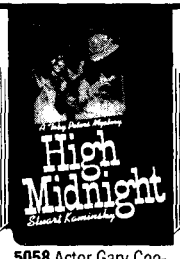

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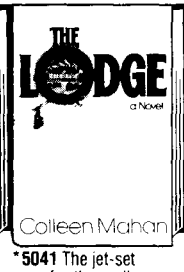

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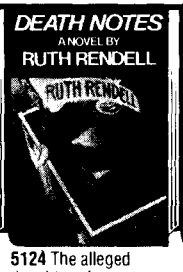

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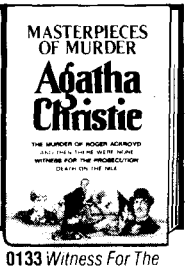

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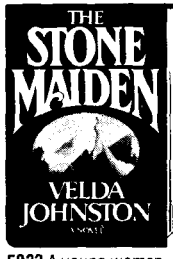

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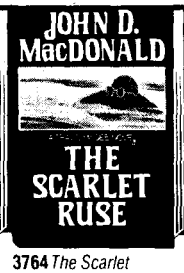
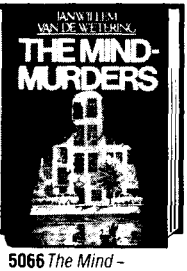


3764 *The Scarlet Ruse; The Deep Blue Good-By; Nightmare in Pink.* Comb. pub. ed. $23.85

***5017** A lawyer's girlfriend is murdered—and he is compelled to investigate. Pub. ed. $12.95



5066 *The Mind-Murders; The Blond Baboon; Death of A Hawker.* Comb. pub. ed. $24.85

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME BEAT

by R. E. PORTER

NINETEENTH CENTURY MYSTERIES: In recent years there's been increased research into Nineteenth Century literature in general and mysteries in particular, especially the early mysteries published in languages other than English. But in many cases the resulting information has been merely tantalizing, leaving one with more questions than answers. For example:

At last summer's Crime Writers 3rd International Congress in Stockholm, a Norwegian delegate spoke of a fellow countryman, Mauritz Hansen, a teacher and writer, who is said to have published a detective short story in 1827—fourteen years before Poe! Is this claim authentic or will the story in question prove to be merely another precursor of the real thing?

A recent guide designed for libraries, *Horror Literature,* edited by Marshall B. Tymn (R. R. Bowker Co.), devotes some 175 pages to the gothic romance, annotating more than four hundred novels in this subgenre. One of these is Eleanor Sleath's *Who's the Murderer? or, The Mystery of the Forest,* published in 1802 by Minerva-Press. The heroine Cecilia discovers the corpse of her father, and must "face and solve the fearful question posed in the novel's title." Does she indeed "solve" it? Was there a female sleuth thirty-nine years before Poe's first male detective?

A new "informal history of detective fiction," *The Whodunit,* by Stefano Benvenuti and Gianni Rizzoni (Macmillan), mentions an 1875 locked-room novel by Eugene Chavette, *La chambre du crime,* with a detective named Patapon. This French novel is also listed, without comment, in the foreign-language section of Robert Adey's *Locked Room Murders.* Is this truly the first locked-room novel, published seventeen years before Israel Zangwill's *The Big Bow Mystery?*

If anyone can answer these questions, drop me a line in care of *EQMM.* I'll pass along any further information that I receive.

MYSTERIES FROM INDIA: There seems little point in reviewing books not readily available to American readers. Still, you may be as surprised as I was to learn that a vast number of paperback mysteries appear each year in India, written in English by Indian authors. They rarely

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reach America, but four books sent to me by a friend seem typical of the output.

All were published by Orient Paperbacks, New Delhi, whose catalog includes hundreds of similar titles, plus occasional American classics like Poe's *Tales of Mystery and Imagination.*

Assignment in Kashmir by Aamir Ali (1973) is an adventure-intrigue novel of a familiar sort, with Captain Ranjit Singh searching for the sources and destination of illegal guns coming into the Kashmir. *The Lalru Murders* by E. N. Mangat Rai (1973) is a traditional whodunit involving drug-running and the lovely young daughter of a sub-inspector of police. *Indian Mafia in Action* by Captain F. D. Colaabavala (1975) is an overheated true-crime expose, with chapters on narcotics, prostitution, counterfeiting, and (yes!) the manufacture of fake Scotch whisky. *Perfect Murder* by Shakuntala Devi (1976) details the transformation of a successful lawyer into a scheming killer intent on committing the perfect crime. The woman author is apparently a mathematical genius known in India as the "Human Computer."

In short, this sampling of mysteries from India shows them to be competently written but unsurprising in content. Still, one wonders if some unsuspected gem might lie hidden among all those other titles.

FORGOTTEN MYSTERIES: Reader Angelo Panagos reminds me of another forgotten mystery—Jonathan Latimer's *The Fifth Grave.* Published in England as *Solomon's Vineyard* in 1941, it had to wait several years for American magazine and paperback publication, both of which were abridged from the British version. Isn't it time we saw the complete book in this country?

FAN CLUB: Fans of Dashiell Hammett have formed The Maltese Falcon Society in San Francisco. Membership is $10.00 and details may be obtained by writing the society at P.O. Box 22544, San Francisco, CA 94122.

ANNIVERSARIES: It's worth noting that 1981 marked the 50th anniversary of The Shadow, Hildegarde Withers, and Asey Mayo. Who said fictional sleuths aren't a diverse group?

CURRENT & COMING ATTRACTIONS: A friend of the late John Creasey, William Vivian Butler, is continuing the Gideon series which Creasey wrote as J. J. Marric. The newest book, *Gideon's Law,* appeared recently in England, published by Hodder & Stoughton.

The Writer, Inc. has published a new revised edition of Patricia Highsmith's *Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction.* Priced at $12.00, this remains the best book on the subject for beginning writers.

EQMN's Jon L. Breen will have a collection of his popular mystery parodies published by Scarecrow Press in 1982.

MWA Edgar winner Bill Granger has a new novel, *Schism,* out this month from Crown.

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BLOODY VISIONS

by CHRIS STEINBRUNNER

Both *Blow Out* and *The Wolfen*, two exceptional recent thrillers, begin with the murders of civic leaders "of presidential timber." In every other respect the films are dissimilar, but each has such energy that their vitality and flaws deserve comment here.

Blow Out is the most recent work of Brian De Palma, who from *Sisters* to *Dressed To Kill* has shown himself capable of striking melodrama in the Hitchcock manner (a director to whom he often pays deliberate homage). *Blow Out* displays all the individuality, the flashing brilliance, and the excesses of his style. It starts right off with bloody visions—a parody of those mad-killer-stalks-girls'-dorm quickies—but we soon realize we are behind the scenes at a movie lab where sound-mixer John Travolta is trying to dub background effects onto a motion-picture sound track: wind, night noises, a woman's scream.

Travolta, an earnest, dedicated technician, is a pleasing figure as he goes about his work, trying to achieve the realism only unobtrusive natural sound can give even this graceless drive-in cheapie. We follow him as —with earphones, portable tape-recorder, and directional mike—he stands vigil on a small suburban bridge by night, picking up the sounds of frogs, hoot owls, rustling stillness. (For one delightful moment an owl cranes forward, picking up *his* sound.) Then, suddenly, a car careens onto the bridge, a tire explodes, and the vehicle plunges into the river. The driver—a well known political candidate—is dead, but Travolta manages to rescue his woman passenger (Nancy Allen). In the excitement that follows something nags at Travolta's memory: he is sure he heard a gunshot just before the tire burst. And he has the tape to prove it.

From this absorbing and well told beginning, excellent in every respect, the film moves into another, less interesting direction. The larger canvas of covert political intrigue is removed. In its place comes another story: the attempts of the hired assassin to eliminate the evidence, Travolta, and the girl by creating the diversion (the villain being, to say the least, somewhat crazed) of several other murders.

Logic, however, was never as important in De Palma's work as spectacular visuals and dazzling storytelling, and *Blow Out* is no exception. Concerned earwitness Travolta and irresponsible party-girl Allen, tracked by a maniac through the historic streets and railway terminals of Philadelphia (the city has never looked more charismatic), will pull you right along.

The Wolfen begins with the savage murder of a rich young city leader and his wife as their chauffeured limousine stops by a New York park. The victim was a "possible heir to the presidency," and the police commissioner calls out of retirement homicide detective Dewey Wilson, played by Albert Finney (*Night Must Fall, Gumshoe,* and Poirot in

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Murder on the Orient Express) because the case is special: "Very weird and very strange, just like you." International terrorists are blamed for the murders, but the deaths are so brutal that Wilson and an aggressive morgue technician (Gregory Hines) begin to suspect that they are the work of animals, possibly wolves. ("With all the psychos running around in New York, you're trying to blame this on endangered species?") But wolves, who—like Indians—were the original inhabitants on the land which is now New York, have long since disappeared, the coroner jokes, on the "Genocide Express." But now people are disappearing—the old, the infirm, the unwanted. "Do you realize how many people vanish every year?" Hines asks. "I think I know where they're going."

The concept of *The Wolfen* is terrifying, and the film is told in extraordinary, surreal camera-visions. The lupine adversaries have heightened senses, can track shadows in darkest night, can hear clouds pass, share incredible pack intelligence. The detective soon begins to realize that the unseen animals kill not out of instinct, but for motive.

Although changed somewhat in concept from Whitley Strieber's 1977 novel, *The Wolfen* is still a frightening tour of the new wildernesses of the Twentieth Century: the sewers, gutters, blighted buildings, and underground recesses of a massive modern city.

And the next time you see a shopping bag unattended in an alley or a shoe lying forlorn by the side of the street, the film may cause you to shudder.

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INTERVIEW: CLARK HOWARD (1)

This is the first part of an interview that will be concluded in the next issue.

EQMN: Your story, "Horn Man" (*EQMM,* 6/2/80), won an Edgar from the Mystery Writers of America for Best Short Story of all those published in the genre last year. Our congratulations.

HOWARD: That was very gratifying. It was a story I had in my head for twenty years, since my first interest in Dixieland music back in Memphis. I've written 15 books, 162 short stories, 21 TV stories, and one TV movie—*Last of the Good Guys,* a CBS Movie of the Week in 1978—but short stories are still my first love and I return to them for recreation when I want relief from other writing.

EQMN: You were nominated for Edgars for your first two fact-crime books, *Six Against the Rock* and *Zebra.* Isn't your most recent book, *American Saturday,* also fact crime?

HOWARD: Yes, it was published in October by Richard Marek/Putnam. It deals with black militant George Jackson and the day he was killed at San Quentin in 1971. George and I grew up one block apart on the West Side of Chicago, he in his ghetto and me in my slum. We never met, but the fact that we came from the same neighborhood intrigued

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me, got me interested in his life, his star-crossed romance with Angela Davis, and his ultimate death.

EQMN: You were born in Chicago?

HOWARD: No, I was born in a small town in Tennessee in 1934. My father was "Tennessee Slim" Howard, a well known bootlegger in business with George Barnes, who later became "Machine Gun" Kelly. My maternal grandfather, Wilbur David Clark, was cousin of Arizona Donnie Clark, who later became Kate "Ma" Barker.

My father was sent to federal prison and my mother took me to Chicago. She overdosed on drugs and died, and I became a ward of Cook County. I lived in foster homes until I was twelve, hung around the Midwest Athletic Club and watched fighters like Tony Zale and Rocky Graziano train. I tried boxing myself, had twelve junior club fights, then got the hell beat out of me by a black boy named Wakefield, so I decided there must be an easier way to make a living.

EQMN: What was it like, living in foster homes?

HOWARD: I was a chronic runaway. I ran away with Ringling Brothers circus once. I got as far as Kankakee, Illinois, before being caught. I was finally put in reform school as an incorrigible. My maternal grandmother got me out two years later and had me sent back to Tennessee.

That's when I first became interested in Dixieland jazz music, hanging around Beale Street in Memphis. I was still a bad kid, so my grandmother agreed to sign falsified papers so I could join the Marine Corps. I enlisted five months before my seventeenth birthday.

EQMN: I'm almost afraid to ask. —What then?

HOWARD: I literally grew up in the Corps. Many of my personal values, my extreme neatness, my ability to organize, my self-confidence, were all learned in the Corps. It was my family and my teacher during some very important years. I served in Korea as a rocket launcher gunner—was with a unit decorated by President Truman for holding the high ground north of the Punchbowl for 200 consecutive days. I spent my eighteenth birthday in Japan on the way *back* from Korea.

"Q"

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THE JURY BOX

by JON L. BREEN

Two of the mystery fiction highlights of the past decade for me were Elizabeth Peters' *Crocodile on the Sandbank* (1975) and James Anderson's *The Affair of the Blood-stained Egg Cosy* (1977). Now their authors have returned to the scenes of these triumphs with sequels, and, if neither quite duplicates the impact of the original, both are most welcome.

**** James Anderson: *The Affair of the Mutilated Mink Coat,* Avon, $2.75. Murder again strikes Alderly, stately home of the gun-collecting Earl of Burford, and again Inspector Wilkins, whose apparent lack of self-confidence recalls Richard Lockridge's Nathan Shapiro, investigates. He is somewhat relieved when a Scotland Yard hotshot, the insufferably patronizing St. John Algood, is called in. The setting is detective-story-land, where murders among the gentry are a common occurrence. Anderson plays his breath-takingly elaborate plot just straight enough that his novel *is* the real thing as well as satirizing it.

*** Elizabeth Peters: *The Curse of the Pharaohs,* Dodd, Mead, $10.95. Amelia Peabody (Victorian in narrative style if not completely so in attitude) has married archaeologist Radcliffe Emerson, settled in England, and given birth to an alarmingly precocious son known as Ramses. The couple return to Egypt to complete the work of a dead colleague (Sir Henry Baskerville, one of several Sherlockian names in the book) and confront the titular curse. There's plenty of fun and action, even some detection, but the tongue-in-cheek style is the key.

**** Lawrence Sanders: *The Third Deadly Sin,* Putnam, $13.95. In an inverted detective novel of unusual power and impact, alternate chapters deal with the random killer called the Hotel Ripper and former New York Chief of Detectives Edward X. Delaney, lured out of retirement to help with the investigation. The book's sex-role reversals exemplify mystery fiction's commitment to the spirit of the ERA. Since Sanders obviously had feminine help in writing from a woman's point of view so convincingly and in such detail, I will offer the following from a female consultant of my own: Enthralling though the story is, the killer's activities are very difficult to believe, and the cast includes an unfortunate Asian-American stereotype. Delaney's sandwich recipes are a plus.

**** Dorothy Uhnak: *False Witness,* Simon and Schuster, $12.95. Two women are at the center of this latest by another regular of the best-seller list: a New York assistant D.A. ambitious for the top spot and a TV talk-show host subjected to one of the most horrible attacks (though short of murder) in recent fiction. Vivid characters, a twisting plot, and an examination of moral and ethical dilemmas give this novel a real gut-level effectiveness.

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*** Sandra Paretti: *Maria Canossa,* translated from the German by Ruth Hein, St. Martin's, $11.95. In a beautifully written (and translated) novel, the best-selling German writer paints a vivid picture of Rome in 1943 and of the strained relations between the German and Italian allies. This is basically a historical romance, with a strong vein of intrigue and mystery. It would make a great Forties' movie.

*** Evelyn Anthony: *The Defector,* $12.95. This is also effective romantic intrigue, with more emphasis on plot twists, concerning a Soviet defector and the female British agent assigned to debrief him. The ending is a little too fairytaleish.

*** Max Collins: *Fly Paper,* Pinnacle, $1.95. The third entry in the Nolan series is another fast-moving, involving, and nimbly plotted crook story, this time involving a skyjacking and a comics convention among other elements.

*** George Bellairs: *Murder Masquerade,* Tower, $1.95. Originally published in Britain in 1961 as *The Body in the Dumb River,* this is a much better Littlejohn case than *Devious Murder,* which appeared here recently in hardcover. Humor, characterization, and atmosphere are the strong points. The situation—the murder of a man who has been leading a double life—is somewhat reminiscent of Queen's *Halfway House.*

*** Pamela Chais: *Final Cut,* Simon and Schuster, $12.95. In a whodunit more notable as a Hollywood novel than a detective story, child-star-turned-cop Bud Bacola investigates the murder of the well hated Beverly Hills agent who destroyed his career.

I would dispute the publisher's claim that this enjoyable novel does not have a Hollywood ending.

** Ralph Hayes: *A Sudden Madness,* Tower, $2.25. A police shooting encites racial tensions in a small city and creates an ethical dilemma for the honest cop assigned to investigate. Though reader interest is generally kept high, some of the love/sex scenes are unintentionally funny, and the badly botched courtroom scenes are not up to the generally competent storytelling of the rest of the book.

For far better courtroom action, look no further than the master himself, Erle Stanley Gardner, whose Perry Mason series is currently being reprinted by Ballantine ($1.95 each). *The Case of the Shapely Shadow* (1960) is a strong entry from the latter part of the series, including one of the longest courtroom sequences in the Mason saga. *The Case of the Haunted Husband* (1941) is a less typical Mason novel, with more variations than usual in pace and mood, stronger characterization, and somewhat more humor. Both are recommended to readers wanting to rediscover one of the genre's best (if recently most unfashionable) practitioners.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 588th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . .Lights! Camera! Action! . . . Suspicion! Jealousy! Action!

The author, Nancy Pickard, is in her mid-thirties. A graduate of the University of Missouri-Columbia School of Journalism, she has made a living as a freelance writer of nonfiction. This story is her first published fiction, but at the time of this writing she is about fifteen pages from the end of the first draft of her first novel—"a mystery, of course" . . .

A MAN AROUND THE HOUSE

by NANCY PICKARD

"I didn't marry you to be alone," she complained. "If I wanted to be by myself all the time, I could have stayed single."

She tossed a rolled-up pair of black nylon socks at him. Resisting the temptation to throw them back at her, hard, he stuffed them in an empty corner of his suitcase.

"Alone?" He laughed without humor. "Since when were you ever alone, even when you were single? I thought you married me to get some privacy."

In spite of her anger she smiled. If his back had not been turned while he folded a shirt, he would have recognized the smile as one of her most charming—a little self-deprecating, but sexy, like a woman aware of herself.

"You don't mind the competition now that it's over, do you, darling?" she teased, her voice soft. "After all, you won the track meet."

He pressed the blue wash-and-wear shirt down on top of several days' supply of clean underwear, his wrists stiff, the tips of his fingers white.

"Well, I'll tell you, Arlene. It's like breaking the four-minute mile.

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You never know when somebody else is going to come along and beat your time."

"Oh, for God's sake." Her smile disappeared. "Don't start on me again. I've never given you any more reason for this jealousy and I never will. Besides, that other time I wasn't even married to you yet. You know perfectly well that I wasn't even sure I wanted to be married, and that's why I did it. But I promised to be faithful to you, and I am and I always will be."

She ran slim fingers through her long frosted hair, nervously pulling it back into a ponytail and tugging at it.

"Why don't you get a little less concerned about your silly fantasies," she said hotly, "and a little more concerned about my safety? I got another one of those phone calls while you were gone last week. They just scare me to death, Gene. The police say sometimes thieves call a house to find out if anybody's home before they rob it."

Releasing her hair so it curled over her shoulders, she leaned toward him. "And sometimes they call to find out if the woman is there by herself. I'm frightened when you're gone, darling. I hate to sleep alone."

He looked at her.

"Oh, Gene," she said, blinking back tears.

"I'll call home about eight o'clock," he'd told her, after they'd made up. "Just to tell you how much I love you."

But his first appointment kept him waiting an hour, and that put him behind schedule all day. Then he had to change hotels when the first one didn't hold his reservation. And then his dinner fish was undercooked, so back it went to the restaurant kitchen. By the time he dialed the area code it was nearly midnight.

"Hello?" She sounded sleepy and confused after the third ring. For some reason he didn't answer immediately. And then, suddenly, he knew he wasn't going to say a word. It was a rotten thing to do, but she'd never know it was he; she'd think it was one of those anonymous callers.

"Hello?" More alert this time, she spoke with a tremor in her light voice.

He pictured her on the left side of their bed, her side, her creamy skin pale with fear and sleep. Was she wearing the silky yellow nightgown with the low bodice? She always wore nightgowns when he was away, she'd told him, because she felt less vulnerable in

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some clothing. Straining to hear over his own breathing, he listened for a telltale slide of bedcovers, a murmur that was not her own.

"Listen, you scum," she said, her voice a shaky rasp. "I'm going to get my husband on the line."

Gene smiled and bowed his head in relief. She was trying to scare the caller by making him think her husband was at home. She really was alone.

From her end of the line a man's voice came at him.

"Who the hell is this?" the man said, and then the phone at his house clicked dead.

In his hotel room in Fort Lauderdale, Gene sat for a long time on the edge of the bed, the receiver in his hand.

He called her the next night, from Miami.

"Yes?" Her voice was mean, abrupt, not the loving tone with which she usually greeted him. "It's you again?"

He listened in agony to the shuffle of sheets and pillows.

"Don't call this house again," the man said. His voice was deep, harsh, almost absurdly masculine.

Only one more night on the road lay between him and home. He decided to call her earlier in the evening, maybe while she and her lover were eating dinner together. Did they dine on the good china, he wondered, the Wedgwood with the dainty pattern she had registered for their wedding six months ago? Did she trot out the brass candlesticks and the incense? Did he stand behind her at the stove, lifting her hair, kissing the back of her neck?

"Hello?" Her voice was friendly, open. She wasn't expecting a call so soon.

He put a hand to his chest, holding his heart in.

"You monster," she screamed. "Why don't you ever say anything?" He heard her drop the phone and run across the kitchen. Another receiver lifted, the one in the bedroom.

"I have called the police," the man said. But Gene knew he hadn't really; he wouldn't dare.

He parked three houses down the street and waited for a few moments, sitting in his car, staring at his own home. She'd switched on all the outside lights. In the yard the gas light turned the lawn yellow; the front stoop was bright as noon and the glow that rose over the house told him the back porch light was also on.

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But within, the house was dark, except for the light on the stove. He let himself in as quietly as possible. Thank God they didn't have a dog yet, though she'd wanted one for protection. From the hallway he could see the calendar she'd taped to the refrigerator door. Before he'd left, she'd circled the 15th as the date of his return.

In the dark he checked his digital luminescent watch. It was two a.m., Thursday the 14th. Quickly he untied his shoes and placed them neatly against the wall. Had they heard anything yet? Were they beginning to be afraid?

Then suddenly he was running, careening against the walls, holding in front of him like a guiding light the pocket knife his father had given him years ago.

"Arlene," he yelled at the top of his voice. "Darling, I'm home!"

She had the light on by the time he reached their bedroom on the second floor. He wasn't even surprised to see her sitting up in bed, staring at him in terror, with no one at her side.

"Couldn't make it tonight, darling?" Gene purred as he lunged at her. "My poor baby, I know how you hate to sleep alone."

Perhaps because of the fear, perhaps because of the pain, she didn't even call his name. She just died.

He didn't want to use the same knife on himself, not the one his father had given him; he didn't want to stain himself inside the way he was stained outside with her dirty blood. But it wasn't necessary to use the knife, he knew. He walked around to his own side of the bed, pulled open the drawer of the night stand, and removed the gun, the one he'd been promising to teach her to use.

Taking it back to her side of the bed, he shoved her body to the middle and sat down in the blood. He checked the gun to be sure it was loaded. There's only one thing this kind of gun is good for, he could see the editorials saying, and that's to kill people. Right on, he thought, right on.

But he needed to explain to somebody, didn't he? He had to let his family and friends know it wasn't his fault, it was her fault.

He looked around for a pencil and paper, but could only find her notepad, blood splattered on her monogram. He opted for the little tape player, the one she kept by the bed to play music when they made love. A nice irony, he thought.

To record his message, he had to push PLAY and RECORD at the same time, but his hands were slippery. His third finger fell off the RECORD button.

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"Who the hell is this?"

The man's voice came at him loud and life-like from the speaker. "Don't call this house again. I have called the police."

With hands that shook as badly as her voice had trembled on the phone, he picked up the little machine. On the cassette tape a blue label bore bold printing: *MAN IN THE HOUSE*, it said, like the informative brochure beside the phone. "Put a stop to anonymous, obscene, or frightening telephone calls. These twenty different messages will convince anyone there's a Man in the House."

He pulled the trigger before he thought to stop the tape. The deep, harsh, almost absurdly masculine voice kept up its warnings to the very end.

"Q"

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—*Publishers Weekly

A STAB IN THE DARK

A Novel of Suspense

LAWRENCE BLOCK

author of ARIEL

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a *NEW* short-short by

WILLIAM BANKIER

"Ever since that night I have tried to forget the scene on the pavement, to forget what happened later" . . .

A FIERCENESS DEEP INSIDE

by WILLIAM BANKIER

All those years ago. . . I was only fifteen and small for my age, nor was I an aggressive person. I could not cope with the violence that took place so suddenly on the pavement in front of me on that summer night. Somebody else might have stepped in and helped that man, but all I did was watch.

It was an easy life for a teenager on vacation from Baytown High School, being a bellboy at the Coronet Hotel. Late in the evening with nobody checking in or out and only the occasional room-service call for ginger ale or ice, there was time to stand on the steps outside the front door beneath the canopy with its border of colored light-bulbs in fly-blown wire cages.

The atmosphere was exciting at night. Huge tractor-trailers hissed around the corner by the traffic lights and came pounding down the street, hardly slowing for the bend in the road leading to the Kingston highway. Sometimes an intercity bus would roll by, drab green and gold, windows dark, dim shapes of people inside, traveling to places as far away as Montreal. Through the open doorway of the beverage room a few yards away I could hear the chaotic yammering of men and women getting drunk, something I did not understand in those far-off days.

The man who came out of the beverage room was unknown to me. He looked to be in his forties—unmatched jacket and trousers, disorganized feet, a halting back-and-forward movement as he hitched

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up his belt and tried to get himself under way. I only became aware of the woman sitting in the car parked at the curb when she called the man by name.

He did a looping sort of knees-up turn and made it to the car where he leaned on the window frame and began talking to the occupant. She was a plain woman with enough makeup on her face to fool the mirror. She and the drunken man seemed to be on good terms; they were deep in conversation immediately.

My eyes wandered. I looked up at the face of the town clock, stared across the market square at the lights of the police station, saw the long roof of the arena where I went ice skating several nights of the week in winter, round and round to those scratchy recordings of Viennese waltzes, watching the girls' legs, linking arms for a few turns with one of the friendlier ones.

A movement close by attracted my attention. A man was stepping down from the beverage-room doorway with surprising speed for someone his size. He was tallish, beefy, his hair cut so short he appeared bald. He wore no jacket, his sleeves were rolled tightly almost to the armpits over massive arms. He looked like a farmer; I could imagine him forking bales of hay ten feet in the air from sunrise to sunset.

What he did then was deliberate, as if he was dealing with cattle. One hand came down on the drunk's collar, pulled him up and turned him around. The fist was launched from the shoulder like a sixteen-pound shot and it struck the drunk in the face with a heavy wet sound. He collapsed as if all his cords had been cut. The woman looked straight ahead through the windshield.

"Now you get the hell out of here," the farmer said.

The drunk, miraculously, managed to pick himself up. His nose was smashed and blood was pouring over his mouth. He set off on an erratic course toward the traffic lights. The farmer made for the beverage-room door, then paused and looked back. "And you watch yourself," he said to the side of the woman's head. "I saw you call him over."

It was so unfair. If the woman had not summoned the drunk, he would have been in the Paragon Café by now, drinking coffee with an undamaged face. The farmer knew the drunk had not made the first move, but he smashed him anyway. Why? Because he could.

I felt a terrible rage and this may be what troubles me to this day about the event. Seeing and hearing that fist go in, watching the blood cascade, a fierceness deep inside me was aroused. I was fright-

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ened and confused. Would I be capable of doing the sort of things those feelings made me imagine? Could I attack that farmer, sink my teeth into his throat, taste the hot blood? If I did, could I continue to be myself? The part I think of as me obviously does not want to go back to being an animal.

Ever since that night I have tried to forget the scene on the pavement, to forget what happened later. I went inside, not willing to stay out front any longer with the silent woman in the car. Neither one of us had tried to do anything for the victim there on the street.

I walked through the lobby, crossed the lounge, went through the back room where we bellboys changed into our uniforms, and stepped outside onto the courtyard bordered by a low stone parapet with the river fifteen feet below. It was noisy back here because of the steady flow of traffic heading across the bridge, but it seemed a private place to me. I had to be alone so that I could absorb the violence I had just witnessed and try to deal with it.

I became aware of movement by the parapet. A man was standing there, swaying slightly. My heart pounded, shocked again. Then I realized what I was looking at. Shorty Leach, the hotel handyman, had washed a pair of his overalls, draped them on a coat hanger, and had hung it on a halltree which he placed beside the parapet where the wet garment would get whatever breeze there was. In the darkness Shorty's overalls looked like a man.

I leaned against the wooden box containing the hotel kitchen's ice supply. An idea was forming in my mind but I was not sure yet what it was. I looked at my watch—the beverage room would be closing soon. I went back inside.

Through the lobby window I could see the car at the curb and the woman still sitting there. I pushed open the swinging door leading into the beverage room and walked through slowly on my way to the washroom. The farmer was drinking beer at a table near the front door. He looked pleased with himself, undisturbed by doubts, able to deal with anything that came his way. I spent a couple of minutes in the washroom and when I came back, the party at his table was breaking up. His friends went out to the street. The farmer moved between the tables, pushed open the washroom door, and disappeared.

There was something on his table—a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. The waiter collecting glasses carried his tray into the other room where the bar was located. The place would be empty now for a couple of minutes. I went to the table, took up the lighter and

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cigarettes, and put them in my pocket. When the farmer came back, I was making a pass at straightening chairs.

He stood over the table, fists on hips. He turned to me. "Cigarettes and a lighter—did you see them, son?"

I went to stand beside him. "A guy came in and took them. The same guy you had trouble with by the car a while ago."

"You sure? I can't believe it."

"He went down the lane that leads out back. I can show you a short cut."

He followed me out of the beverage room, across the lounge, through our changing room, and out onto the back courtyard. Nobody saw us. Going from light into darkness, we were both blind.

"I can't see a damn thing," he said.

"I think I see him."

"Where?"

"There." I pointed in the direction of Shorty Leach's overalls. Gradually they were materializing in the dark, a swaying figure a few yards away. "I heard something," I said. "He threw something in the river."

"Sonofa-" The farmer charged forward and I followed on his heels. He reached for the shape which collapsed at his touch and sent him stumbling forward, and he went tumbling over the parapet and down into the river.

The traffic kept up its continuous roar across the bridge. I had to lean over the parapet to hear his voice. It sounded faint; he must have hurt himself on a rock in the river. "What?"

"Help me. I can't hold on . . . the current . . . get a rope or something . . ."

I didn't help him. I threw his lighter and cigarettes over the edge and went inside the hotel. A rope would have been the answer and there was one in the back room. But how could I have hoisted that big ox up out of the river? I was only fifteen, and small for my age.

"Q"

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a ***NEW*** short story by

SIMON BRETT

Meet Rick Lawton, the representative of Corforamic Tours, stationed in Corfu—a young man looking for the main chance, looking to marry "that sort of girl"—an heiress . . .

PLAYING IT COOL

by SIMON BRETT

There was only one girl worth looking at in that planeload. I'd been doing the job for two months, since May, and I'd got quicker at spotting them.

She was tall, but then I'm tall, so no problem there. Thin, but round in the right places. Dress: expensive casual. Good jeans, white cotton shirt, artless but pricey. Brown eyes, biscuit-colored hair pulled back into a rubber-band knot, skin which had already seen a bit of sun and just needed Corfu to polish up the color. (Have to watch that. With a lot of the girls—particularly from England—they're so pale you daren't go near them for the first week. Physical approaches get nothing but a little scream and a nasty smell of Nivea on your hands.)

The girl's presence moved me forward more keenly than usual with my little spiel. "Hello, Corforamic Tours, Corforamic Tours. I am your Corforamic representative, Rick Lawton. Could you gather up your baggage, please, and proceed outside the arrivals hall to your transport."

I ignored the puffing English matrons and homed in on the girl's luggage.

It was then that I saw the other one. She looked younger, shorter, dumpier; paler brown hair, paler eyes, a sort of diluted version, as

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if someone had got the proportions wrong when trying to clone from the dishy one.

They were obviously together, so I had to take one bag for each. They thanked me in American accents. That in itself was unusual. Most of the girls who come on these package tours are spotty typists from Liverpool.

But then their destination was unusual, too. The majority of the Corforamic properties are tiny, twin-bedded apartments in Paleokastritsa and Ipsos. But there's one Rolls-Royce job near Aghios Spiridion—a converted windmill, sleeps eight, swimming pool, private beach, live-in maid, telephone. And that was where they were going. They'd booked for a month.

I read it on their labels. *Miss S. Stratton* (the dishy one). *Miss C. Stratton* (the other one). And underneath each name, the destination—Villa Costas.

By six I'd seen all the ordinary ones installed, answered the questions about whether it was safe to drink the water, given assurances that the plumbing worked, given the names of doctors to those with small children, told them which supermarkets sold Rice Krispies, quoted the minimal statistics for death by scorpion sting, and tried to convince them that the mere fact of their having paid for a fortnight's holiday was not automatically going to rid the island of mosquitoes.

Villa Costas was a long way to the north side of the island. I'd pay a call there the next day.

I drove to Niko's on the assumption that none of my charges would venture as far as his disco on their first evening. You get to value your privacy in this job. I sat under the vine-laden shelter of the bar and had an ouzo.

As I clouded the drink with water and looked out over the glittering sea, I felt low. Seeing a really beautiful woman always has that effect on me. Seems to accentuate the divide between the sort of man who gets that sort of girl, and me. I always seem to end up with the ugly ones.

It wasn't just that. There was money, too, always money. Sure I got paid as the Corforamic rep, but not much. Winter in England loomed, winter doing some other demeaning selling job, earning peanuts. Not the sort of money that could coolly rent the Villa Costas for a month. Again there was the big divide. Rich and poor. And I

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knew to which side I really belonged. Poor, I was cramped and frustrated. Rich, I could really be myself.

Niko's voice cut into my gloom. "Telephone, Rick."

She identified herself as Samantha Stratton. The dishy one. Her sister had seen a rat in the kitchen at Villa Costas. Could I do something about it?

I said I'd be right out there. Rats may not be dragons, but they can still make you feel knight-errantish. And as any self-respecting knight errant knows, there is no damsel so susceptible as one in distress.

Old Manthos keeps a kind of general store just outside Kassiope. It's an unbelievable mess—slabs of soap mixed up with dried fish, oil lamps, saucepans, tins of powdered milk, brooms, faded postcards, coils of rope, tubes of liniment, deflated beach balls, dusty Turkish Delight, and novelty brandy bottles shaped like Ionic columns. Most of the stock appears to have been there since the days of his long-dead father, whose garlanded photograph earnestly surveys the chaos around him.

But, in spite of the mess, Manthos usually has what you want. May take a bit of time and considerable disturbance of dust, but he'll find it.

So it proved on this occasion. With my limping Greek it took a few minutes for him to understand the problem, but once he did, he knew exactly where to go. A crate of disinfectant was upturned, a bunch of children's fishing nets knocked over, a pile of scouring pads scattered, and the old man triumphantly produced a rusty tin, whose label was stained into illegibility.

"Very good," he said, "very good. Kill rats, kill anything." He drew his hand across his throat evocatively.

I paid him, and as I walked out of the shop he called out, "And if that doesn't work—"

"Yes?"

"Ask the priest. The Papas is sure to have a prayer for getting rid of rats."

It was nearly eight o'clock when I got to Villa Costas, but that's still hot in Corfu in July. Hot enough for Samantha to be on the balcony in a white bikini. The body fulfilled, or possibly exceeded, the promise I had noted at the airport.

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"Candy's in bed," she said. "Shock of seeing the rat on top of all that traveling brought on a migraine."

"Ah. Well, let's see if we can put paid to this rat's little exploits," I said, in a businesslike and, to my mind, rather masculine manner.

"Sure."

I filled some little paper dishes with poison and laid them round the kitchen floor. Then I closed the tin and washed my hands. "Shall I leave the poison with you, so you can put down more if you want to?"

She was standing in the kitchen doorway. The glow of the dying sun burned away her bikini. Among other things I saw her head shake. "No, thanks. Dangerous stuff to have around. You take it."

"Okay."

"Like a drink?"

She was nice. Seemed very forthcoming with me, too. But I didn't want to queer anything up by moving too fast.

Still, when she asked where one went for fun on the island, I mentioned Niko's disco. And by the time I left—discreetly, playing it cool—we'd agreed to meet there the next evening.

And as I drove back to my flat in Corfu Town, I was beginning to wonder whether maybe after all I was about to become the sort of man who gets that sort of girl.

When I arrived at nine, there were quite a lot of people at the disco. But no tall beautiful American girl. Come to that, no less tall, less beautiful American girl.

I could wait. Niko signaled me over to where he was sitting, and I ordered an ouzo.

The group drinking at the table was predictable. Niko's two brothers (the one who drove a beer lorry and the one who rented out motor-scooters) were there, along with his cousin the electrician, and Police Inspector Kantalakis, whose relaxed interpretation of government regulations about overcrowding, noise, and hygiene always insured him a generous welcome at the bar.

There was also a new face. Wiry black hair thinning on top, thick black mustache draped over the mouth, healthy growth of chest hair escaping from carefully faded denims. Solid, mid-thirties maybe, ten years older than me. "Rick, this is Brad," said Niko.

He stretched out a hairy hand. "Hi." Another American. "We were just talking about Niko's wife," he said with a grin.

They all laughed, Niko slightly ruefully. Whereas some people

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have bad backs or business worries to be tenderly asked after, Niko always had a wife problem. It was a running joke, and from the way Brad raised it he seemed to know the group well. "How are things at home, Niko?" Brad continued.

The proprietor of the bar shrugged that round-shouldered gesture that encompasses the whole world of marital misery.

Brad chuckled. "Sure beats me why people get married at all."

Inspector Kantalakis and the others gave man-of-the-world laughs, siding with him and conveniently forgetting their own tenacious little wives. The American turned to me. "You married?"

I shook my head. "Never felt the necessity."

"Too right. There is no necessity."

The married men laughed again, slightly less easily. Brad called their bluff. "Now come on, all you lot got wives. Give me one good reason *why*, one argument in favor of marriage."

Inspector Kantalakis guffawed. "Well, there's the bedroom—"

"You don't have to get married for that," I said.

The Inspector looked at me with distaste. For some reason he never seemed to like me much.

"Come on, just one argument for marriage," insisted Brad.

They looked sheepish. Faced by this transatlantic sophisticate, none of them was going to show himself up by mentioning love, children, or religion. They wanted to appear modern, and were silent.

"You think of any reason, Rick?"

"Money," I said, partly for the laugh I knew the word would get, but also because the idea had been going through my mind for some years. Marriage remains one of the few legal ways that someone without exceptional talents can make a quick and significant change in his material circumstances. I reinforced the point, playing for another laugh. "Yes, I reckon that's the only thing that would get me to the altar. I'm prepared to marry for money."

As the laugh died, Brad looked at me shrewdly. "If that's so, then you ought to set your cap for what's just arriving."

I turned to see the girls from Villa Costas getting out of a rented car. "Those two," Brad continued, "are the daughters of L. K. Stratton of Stratton Oil & Gas. When the old man goes, the older one gets the lot."

I was feeling my usual frustration. The two girls had joined us at the table and had a couple of drinks. Seeing them together again had only reinforced my previous impression. Miss S. (Samantha)

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Stratton was not only beautiful she was also poised and entertaining. Miss C. (Candice, to give her full name) Stratton was not only drab in appearance she was mouselike and tentative in conversation. I waited for a lull in the chat so that I could ask Samantha to dance. If she had needed any recommendation other than that body, Brad's words had just supplied it.

But the minute I was about to suggest a dance, damn me if Brad, who seemed to know the girls quite well, didn't say, "C'mon, Sam, let's bop," and lead her off into the flashing interior of the disco. The way they started dancing suggested that they knew each other very well.

Within minutes Niko and his relations and Inspector Kantalakis had melted away, leaving me in a role I had suffered too often in double dates from schooltime onward—stuck with the ugly one.

And what made it worse was that I gathered in this case she was also the poor one.

I stole a look across at her. The sun had already started its work on her pale flesh. The nose glowed; in a couple of days the skin would be coming off like old wallpaper.

She caught my eye and gave a gauche little smile, then looked wistfully to the thundering interior.

No, no, I wasn't going to be caught that way. That terrible old feeling that you *ought* to ask a girl to dance. Hell, I was twenty-six, not some creepy little adolescent.

Still, I had to say something, or just leave. "Your big sister seems to be enjoying herself," I commented sourly.

"Half-sister, actually. And only big in the sense that she's taller than I am."

"You mean you're older than she is?"

"Two years and four months older."

"Would you like to dance?"

Candice was very shy and I treated her with exemplary tact. Met her every evening for most of the next week. Picked her up at the Villa Costas and took her down to Niko's. She was too shy to go there on her own, and Sam and Brad (who turned out to be engaged, for God's sake!) seemed anxious to be off on their own most of the time.

So I courted Candice like a dutiful boy-next-door. Looked at her soulfully, danced close, kissed her sedately goodbye. I was the kind

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of young man every mother would like her daughter to meet—serious, respectful, with intentions honorable even to the point of matrimony.

And once I'd written off any chance with Samantha, Candice really didn't seem too bad. Not unattractive at all. Any personal lustre she lacked I could readily supply by thinking of her father's millions.

The fourth night, as I kissed her goodbye with a kind of boyish earnestness, I explained that a new planeload of tourists was arriving the next day and I wouldn't have time to pick her up. She looked disappointed, which showed I was getting somewhere. Rather than not see me, she agreed to go under her own steam to Niko's and meet me there at nine. That was a big step for her. I promised I wouldn't be late.

By the middle of the following afternoon it was clear I was going to be. The flight from London was delayed by an hour and a half.

Never mind. Still the dutiful, solicitous boy-next-door, I rang the Villa Costas. Brad answered. Sorry, would he mind telling Candice I couldn't get to Niko's till half-past ten? Either I'd see her there or pick her up usual time the next evening.

Sure, Brad would see she got the message.

When I saw her face at 10:20 that night at Niko's, it was clear she hadn't got the message. She was sitting at the same table as, but somehow not with, Niko's relations and Inspector Kantalakis. And she looked furious.

It didn't surprise me. Greek men don't really approve of women, even tourists, going to bars alone, and that lot wouldn't have made any secret of their feelings. I moved forward with smiling apologies on my lips.

But I didn't get a chance to make them. Candice rose to her feet. "I only stayed," she spat out, "to tell you that I think you're contemptible, and that we will not meet again."

"Look, I left a message with Brad. I said I'd be late and—"

"It is not just your lateness I'm talking about. Goodbye." And she swept off to the rented car.

I sat down, shaken. Inspector Kantalakis was looking at me with a rather unpleasant smile. "What the hell did you say to her?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I may have mentioned your views on marriage."

"What? Oh, damn—you mean about marrying for money?"

"I may have mentioned that, yes."

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"But when I said it, it was only a joke."

"You sounded pretty serious to me," said the Inspector, confirming my impression that he didn't like me one bit.

But that evening wasn't over. I started hitting the local paint-stripper brandy. I was fit to be tied. The Inspector and the others sauntered off, as if satisfied by their evening's destruction. I gazed bitterly across the black sea to the few mysterious lights of Albania.

"Rick." I don't know how long a time had passed before the sound broke into my gloom. I looked up.

It was Samantha. And she was crying.

"What's the matter?"

"It's that swine, Brad."

"Oh. I've got a bone to pick with him, too. What's he done?"

"Oh, he's just—it's always the same. He treats me badly and he goes off with some other girl and always reckons he can just pick up again as if nothing has happened and—well, this is the last time, the last time." She was crying now.

"Can I get you a drink or—?"

"No, I just want to go back to the villa. I was looking for Candy. I wanted a lift. Brad's driven off in his car and—"

"Candy's gone, I'm afraid."

"Oh."

"I'll give you a lift."

When we were in the car park, she was seized by another burst of crying and turned toward me. Instinctively my arms were round her slender, soft body and I held her tight as the spasms subsided.

"Doesn't take you long," said a voice in Greek.

I saw Inspector Kantalakis' sardonic face in the gloom.

"Mind your own business," I said. At least, that would be a paraphrase. The expression on the Inspector's face showed that I was making great strides with my colloquial Greek.

"She's upset," I continued virtuously. "I'm just comforting her, as a friend."

But I wasn't, I wasn't.

Amazing how quickly things can change. Actually, since by "things" I mean women, I suppose it's not so amazing.

I got to know a lot more about Samantha on that drive back, and I discovered that appearances can be distinctly deceptive. For a start, the engagement with Brad was not, as it had appeared, the marriage

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of true minds, but a kind of professional blackmail exerted on an unwilling girl by a selfish and violent man. She had been trying to break it off for years.

Also—and this was the bit I enjoyed hearing—the reason for the quarrel of that night had been her admitting she fancied someone else. Me.

"But if you're so keen to get rid of him, why did you mind his going off with another girl?"

"Only because I know he'll be back. He never stays away for long. And then he thinks he can just pick up where he left off."

"Hmm. But he couldn't do that if he found you'd got someone else."

"That's true."

The car stopped outside Villa Costas. We were suddenly in each other's arms. Her body spoke its clear message to mine, while our tongues mumbled meaningless nothings. Yes, I was the only man who she'd ever felt like that about.

But no, I'd better not come into the villa now. Because of Candy. And she didn't really fancy the beach. Tomorrow. Tomorrow afternoon at three. She'd see that Candy was out. And then . . .

I arrived sharp at three the following afternoon in a state of—well, let's say in a predictable state of excitement.

But things weren't initially as private as I had hoped. Theodosia, the live-in maid, was sitting on the veranda under the shade of an olive tree. (Corfiots, unlike the tourists, regard sun as a necessary evil, and avoid it when possible.) She grinned at me in a way that I found presumptuous.

And then as if that wasn't enough, Candice Stratton appeared from the villa and stood for a moment blinded by the sun. She wore a bikini in multi-colored stripes that accentuated her dumpiness; she carried a box of Turkish Delight that would no doubt, in time, accentuate it further. The other hand held a striped towel and a thriller.

When her eyes were accommodated to the brightness, they saw me, and an expression of loathing took over her face. "You creep! I said I never wanted to see you again. So don't think you can come crawling back."

Any intentions I might have had to be nice to her vanished. "I didn't come to see *you*," I said, and walked past her into the villa. I felt Theodosia's inquisitive eyes follow me.

Samantha was on the balcony in the white bikini. Momentarily

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I played the aggrieved lover. "I thought you were going to see Candy was out."

"Sorry, we got delayed. Brad came round."

I hadn't reckoned on that.

"Don't worry, Rick. I sent him off with a flea in his ear." She looked at me levelly. "I haven't changed my mind."

I relaxed. "How'd he take it?"

"Usual arrogance. Said he'd be back. Even tried his old trick of making up to Candy to make me jealous. Brought her a big box of Turkish Delight and all that. He ought to know by now it doesn't work."

"On you or on her?"

"On me, you fool." She rose and put an arm round my waist. Together we watched Candy across the little private bay, settling on her towel for further ritual peeling.

I looked into Samantha's brown eyes, squinting against the glare of the sun. I was aware of the tracery of fine lines around them as her body touched mine.

"Candy be out there for some time?" I murmured.

"You betcha. She'll eat her way right through that box of Turkish Delight. Always eats when she's unhappy."

My hand glided up the curve of her back. "Shall we go inside?"

There was a double bed (a rarity in the world of Corforamic, another luxury feature of the Villa Costas). I reached more purposefully for Samantha.

"Oh, damn," she said.

"What?"

"Candy didn't take her drink."

"So?"

"There's a large Coca-Cola in the fridge. She was going to take it with her."

"So?" I shrugged.

"So . . . if she hasn't got it she'll be back here as soon as she's thirsty. And the Turkish Delight's going to make her very thirsty."

"Ah."

"You take it over to her."

"But she doesn't want to see me."

"Then we won't be disturbed." There was a kind of logic in that. "Go on, Rick. And while you're away I'll get more comfortable."

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When I got back, Samantha was waiting with a bottle of Remy Martin and two glasses.

Candy had been predictably annoyed to see me, but had accepted the bottle of Coke wordlessly. And Theodosia's beady little eyes had followed me all the way across the beach and back.

But I soon forgot both of them. Samantha's charms would have cleaned out the memory bank of a computer.

Time telescoped and distorted . . . Darkness came and we didn't notice it. I didn't hear whether Candice came in or not, and eventually sleep claimed us . . .

It was therefore an unpleasant shock to be awakened by the sight of Inspector Kantalakis at the foot of the bed, and by the sound of his voice saying, in English, "Still furthering your marriage plans, Mr. Lawton?"

We both sat up. Samantha was still half asleep. "Marriage?" she echoed. "You did mean it, Rick, what you said last night, about wanting to marry me?"

"Uh?" I was still half asleep myself.

"I have bad news," said Inspector Kantalakis.

We looked at him blearily.

"Miss Stratton, your sister was found this morning on the beach. Dead."

"What?"

"She appears to have been poisoned."

I don't know if you've ever been involved in a murder inquiry in Greece, but let me tell you, it is something to be avoided. Questions, questions, questions, endlessly repeated in a hot concrete police cell. And expressions on the cops' faces that show they don't subscribe to the old British tradition of people being innocent until proved guilty.

I was with them for about twenty-four hours, I suppose, and the first thing I did when I got out was to go up to the Villa Costas. Samantha looked shaken. She'd had quite a grilling too, though some connection of her father's had pulled strings through the American Embassy in Athens and it hadn't taken as long as mine.

"And now the swine has disappeared," were her first words.

"Who?" My mind wasn't working very well.

"Brad."

"What do you mean?"

"Brad must have poisoned her."

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"Why?" I couldn't catch up with all this.

"Because of the money."

"Uh?"

"He wanted me *and* Daddy's money. With Candy dead, I inherit."

"Good lord, that never occurred to me."

"Well, it's true."

"But how did he do it?"

"Obvious. The Turkish Delight."

"Are you sure?"

"The Inspector says he hasn't received the forensic analysis yet—everything takes that much longer on an island—but I'd put money on the results."

"Brad'll never get away with it."

"Oh, he'll have managed some sort of alibi. He's devious. He *will* get away with it, unless we can find some proof of his guilt."

"But it will all have been for nothing if he doesn't get you."

"Yes." She sounded listless.

"And he hasn't got you, has he?"

She pulled herself together and looked at me with a little smile. "No, he hasn't. You have."

"So that's all right."

She nodded, but still seemed troubled. "The only thing that worries me—"

"Yes?"

"—is that he still has power over me when I see him."

"Then we must make sure you don't see him. If he's disappeared, that doesn't sound too difficult. Anyway, as soon as the analysis of the Turkish Delight comes through, the police'll be after him."

"But suppose they're not. Suppose he's arranged some kind of alibi—"

"Don't worry." Suddenly I was full of crusading spirit. "If the police won't do it, I'll prove myself that he poisoned Candy."

"Oh, thank you, Rick. Thank God I've got you."

I tried all the contacts I had on the island, but none of them had seen Brad. I didn't give up, though. I wanted to do it for Samantha, to prove Brad's crime and see to it that he was put behind bars where he belonged.

It was the next day she told me she was going to have to fly back to the States. Her father, L. K. Stratton, had had a mild stroke when he heard the news of his older daughter's death, and the younger

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one had to fly back to be by his side. Inspector Kantalakis had cleared her from his inquiries, and she was free to go. Apparently, he was near an arrest—just needed the results of the forensic analysis to clinch it.

Though I was depressed about her going, the news on the investigation front was promising. The police were obviously close to nailing Brad, merely needing proof of the poison in the Turkish Delight.

All they had to do then was find him.

Unless I could find him first.

I promised to see Samantha off at the airport.

It was less than two weeks since I'd first seen her when I kissed her goodbye. A lot had happened in less than two weeks. When I first saw that splendid body I hadn't dared hope that it would ever be pressed to mine with such trust and hope.

"I'll come back as soon as I can, Rick. Really."

"I know. Let's hope you're back to give evidence at a murder trial."

"I will be. Don't worry."

Her baggage was checked through to Kennedy via London. There didn't seem much more to say. Our togetherness didn't need words.

Not many, anyway. "And then, Sam, we'll get married, huh?"

She nodded gently and gave me another kiss. Then she turned and went off toward the Departure Lounge. Tall, beautiful—and mine.

Not only mine, it occurred to me, but also very rich. Suddenly I had got it all, suddenly I was the sort of man who got that sort of girl.

I watched her into the Departure Lounge. She didn't turn round. We didn't need that sort of clinging farewell.

Suddenly I got a shock. A dark, denim-clad figure had appeared beside her in the Lounge. Brad.

I couldn't go through the ticket control to save her. I had to find the police. And fast.

I was in luck. As I rushed into the dazzle of sunlight, I saw Inspector Kantalakis leaning against my car.

"The man who murdered Candy—I know who it is," I panted.

"So do I," said the Inspector.

"He intended to marry Samantha, but he wanted the money too, so he poisoned Candy."

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"Exactly."

"Well, why don't you arrest him?"

"I've been waiting for a forensic report for final proof. Now I have it. Now there will be an arrest."

"Good. He's in the airport building. The plane leaves in half an hour."

"Yes." The Inspector made no move.

Fine, he must have the place staked out. We could relax; there was plenty of time. I grinned. "So the poison *was* in the Turkish Delight."

He shook his head. "No."

"No?"

"It is really a very straightforward case. Our murderer, who made no secret of his intention to marry for money, tried first with the older sister, the heiress. Unfortunately they quarreled, so he took up with the younger one. But she would only inherit if her older sister died. So . . ." He shrugged.

"I didn't realize Brad had ever made a play for Candy."

"He hadn't. Nor did he kill her. After he saw the girls in the Villa Costas, he spent the rest of the day of the murder with me."

"Then who are we talking about?" I asked blankly.

Inspector Kantalakis drew one hand from behind his back. It held a rusty tin, a tin which had been bought from Manthos' shop. "I found this in the trunk of your car."

"Yes, I bought it to deal with the rats at the Villa Costas."

"Really? It was this poison that killed Candice Stratton. It was put in the bottle of Coca-Cola."

"The Coca-Cola!"

"Yes. The Coca-Cola you gave to the murder victim. Do you deny you gave it to her? The maid Theodosia saw you."

"No, I gave it all right. I see! Brad must have dosed it, knowing Candy would drink it sooner or later. He must have fixed it when he came round that morning with the Turkish Delight. Samantha may have seen him go to the fridge. Ask her."

"I have asked her, Mr. Lawton. According to Miss Samantha Stratton, there never was any Coca-Cola in the Villa Costas. Nor, incidentally, were there any rats," Inspector Kantalakis added portentously.

Then he arrested me.

And I realized that, after all, I wasn't the sort of man who got that sort of girl.

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a *NEW* Henry Turnbuckle story by

JACK RITCHIE

It's almost as if mysteries are waiting in ambush for Henry Turnbuckle wherever he may go. Why, Henry can't walk to the corner newsstand for a paper without bumping into a baffling crime; and by the time he gets back, Henry can have at least three theories and solutions buzzing in his brain. Fancy ones, too . . . Even zestier and zanier than usual! It's a strange, strange world that Jack Ritchie conjures up for us . . .

THE MESSAGE IN THE MESSAGE

by JACK RITCHIE

Her violet eyes continued to speculate. "Haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

"Perhaps," I beamed. "If you receive the upstate edition of our newspaper, you may have come across my likeness two years ago. At the ground-breaking ceremonies for the new police gymnasium. I was third from the left, holding the mayor's topcoat."

"No, not that." Then she remembered. "On the university campus ten years or so back. Weren't you the one carrying that long oar over your shoulder?"

Ralph showed interest. "Oar?"

"When did this murder take place?" I asked, changing the subject.

Ralph and I had been on our way up to Sturgeon Bay to bring back a robbery suspect wanted for questioning in Milwaukee. We had taken the lake-shore route, occasionally straying to parallel county roads for a closer view of the lake, and it had been on one of these that our car broke down.

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We had lifted the hood, gazed with ignorant wondering eyes at the contents thereunder, and Ralph had uttered words which were not a benediction.

We had been debating the merits of walking north or south, or splitting and covering both directions in search of a phone, when the Mercedes appeared and pulled to a stop beside us.

The woman inside—raven-haired and perhaps in her late twenties—rolled down the window on the passenger side. "In trouble?"

"Madam," I admonished, "it is not a wise practice for a woman traveling alone to stop on a secluded road to speak to absolute strangers."

"Shut up, Henry," Ralph suggested. We identified ourselves, Ralph explained our predicament, and we soon found ourselves in the back seat of the Mercedes.

She drove perhaps a half mile through the wood-bordered road and then turned in at a gatehouse. There followed another quarter mile over a graveled road through more trees until we broke into a clearing and saw an oval driveway behind which waited a French Norman edifice large enough to cause Ralph to remove the cigar stub from his mouth and stare.

Inside, at the first phone, Ralph had consulted the local telephone directory and made a call to a garage in Kewaunee. He gave pinpoint directions regarding the spot at which our car could be found.

Andrea Whitcomb—her name matched her beauty—then drove us back to our vehicle. She elected to wait until we were safely picked up.

"Police detectives?" she had asked.

Ralph nodded. "Give Henry the facts and a little room to theorize and he raises up a storm."

I blushed modestly. "I do try."

The tow truck, with the driver and his aide in its cab, arrived after twenty minutes. The two of them gazed down at the engine of our car, palpated here and there, and concurred that nothing could be done on the spot. The car would have to be towed to Kewaunee.

Since there was no room in the truck cab, Ralph and I faced the prospect of being towed to Kewaunee while seated in our vehicle canted at a forty-degree angle.

"Why don't you stay overnight at my place?" Andrea had offered. "I'll drive you to Kewaunee when your car is repaired."

I demurred. "I'm certain that Ralph and I can find a motel."

Ralph took me aside. "Henry, my wife will kill me if she finds out

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that we turned down an invite like this. I'll bet the place has a dozen bathrooms."

And so we had found ourselves back at Andrea's home where we had a light supper and then adjourned to the terrace—Ralph with a bottle of cold beer, I with a glass of sherry, and Andrea with a can of diet soda.

The sun set, a gibbous moon rose, and we had a fine view of our freshwater ocean when Andrea finally commenced to tell us about the murder.

"It happened four years ago."

"And the victim?"

"My father. He was stabbed with a fish-filleting knife. He lived long enough to use a tenpenny nail to scratch all twenty-six letters of the alphabet on the plank flooring of the boathouse."

"Boathouse?"

"Yes. That's where he was killed. You can't see it from here, but it's down there at the foot of the bluffs. The flooring is waterproofed with a battleship-gray paint and the letters were quite clear."

I pondered. "All the letters of the alphabet? Upper case, lower case, or mixed?"

"All upper case. Capitals."

"Were any of the letters significantly different in size from the others?"

"No. Just plain block printing."

"Were any missing? Or repeated?"

"Each and every one of them appeared just once and in the proper alphabetical order."

"Was there any punctuation between the letters? Commas, dashes, semicolons?"

"Nothing." But then she thought that over. "There *was* a period after the letter Z."

"Ah, ha," I said significantly.

"Ah ha what?" Ralph asked.

"I don't know yet, Ralph, but the pieces are beginning to fall into place."

I returned to Andrea. "If your father didn't die immediately, why didn't he shout for help?"

"Possibly he did. But the boathouse is some distance from here and at the water's edge. Our lake surf can be every bit as noisy as the ocean at times and if he called, he wasn't heard. And evidently he didn't have the strength to make it all the way back up to the

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house. I suppose he decided that the only thing remaining was to leave some kind of message pointing to his murderer, but no one has been able to figure out what that message might be."

"I assume the police found no fingerprints on the knife?"

"None. They think the prints were wiped off with a rag found near the body."

"Did your father have a pen or pencil on his person?"

"No."

I made a steeple with my fingertips and gazed over it wisely. "So here's our problem. If the victim knew the identity of his killer, why didn't he simply indicate that knowledge by scratching that name on the planking? And if he did *not* know the identity of the murderer—assuming it was someone whom he'd never seen before—why couldn't he have etched something to that effect on the planking? Why, instead, did he choose to spend the last moments of his life laboriously scratching all the letters of the alphabet? Did the police have any suspects?"

"They suspected everybody, I suppose. An intruder—who might have been surprised while attempting to steal something from the boathouse—the servants, and all of us in the house just prior to the murder."

"Who were the latter?"

"Helmuth McCarthy, my husband Cyril, and myself."

"Who is Helmuth McCarthy?"

"Helmuth's parents live just down the road. The next place. Helmuth and I were practically raised together. He always intended to marry me, but somehow Cyril came along and preempted."

"Would he have had any motive for wishing your father dead?"

"Absolutely none."

"And was the same true of your husband, Cyril?"

"No. Let me put it this way. My father had a great deal of money and property. It did not necessarily follow, however, that I had access to any large part of it, as my husband discovered soon after he married me. Father controlled the purse strings—though Cyril and I did not exactly live in poverty—and that control was tight. It was further aggravated by the fact that my father had absolutely no use for Cyril."

She elaborated. "Cyril was a tennis bum when I met him and hardly much more than that after our marriage. He was a terrific dancer, could water ski, but couldn't look anybody straight in the eye. In short, Father didn't like him from the word go."

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"Why in the world did you marry Cyril?"

"I'm not at all certain now. Possibly it was some sort of juvenile revolt against parental discipline. You know, shake up the old man. At the time though it seemed like a good idea."

"So the only way your husband could get his hands on your father's money was if you inherited it?"

"That's about it."

I smiled thinly. "On the other hand, isn't it also possible that you yourself might have murdered your father for basically the same reason—to get hold of his money?"

Ralph poured more beer into his glass. "So you carried an oar over your shoulder?"

I blinked at the interruption. "For about three hours, Ralph. Until the campus police arrested me." Then I re-focused my mind to Andrea's problem: her father had been murdered, but before he had died, he had scratched the letters of the entire alphabet—upper case—*on the planking of the boathouse floor. What the devil did* that mean?

"How did it all start, Henry?" Ralph asked.

"What start?"

"The oar, Henry."

I sighed. "Oh, that. Well, one day I was sitting in my dormitory room learning how to smoke a pipe, when in walked Charley Swenson. Charley was a big man on the campus and also the equipment manager for the hockey team. I used to nod to him whenever we passed, but this was the first time he'd ever actually spoken to me.

"I don't remember how the talk got around to it, but Charley maintained that our university was so sophisticated that a man could walk around the campus with an oar on his shoulder and not one soul would condescend to ask why. Well, naturally I took exception to that. Our university was certainly sophisticated—four of our pompon girls were members of the Mensa society—but oar-carrying was just a step beyond. The next thing I knew Charley had bet me five dollars that I could carry that oar all day long and not get asked even once. Naturally I took the bet."

"Naturally."

"I had expected an ordinary rowboat oar, or maybe even a canoe paddle, but it turned out that Charley wanted me to carry a sculling oar. They're twelve feet long, you know."

"He just happened to have one on him?"

"It was lying out there in the hall, Ralph. I'd never noticed it

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before and Charley said he didn't know how it had gotten there, but as long as it was, we might as well use it."

But I was digressing from my murder case. I turned to Andrea. "What time of day did the murder occur?"

"The coroner put it at between eleven and twelve P.M."

"And what occurred at the house in the evening hours before your father's death?"

"Nothing much. The four of us—Helmuth, Cyril, my father, and I—played bridge until about ten. Then Father went down to the boathouse. He said that one of the boat motors had been giving him trouble and he wanted to take another look at it. Actually he just liked to putter around with the boat and one excuse was as good as another. Whenever he went down there, he usually stayed for hours."

"Then all of you knew that he had gone down to the boathouse and that very likely he would be down there for some time? And what did the rest of you do after your father left?"

"Helmuth went home. My husband decided to have another drink and read the evening paper. The sports pages, of course. And I went upstairs to bed. I fell asleep immediately."

"This Helmuth McCarthy," I said. "Are you positive he left the grounds? Might he not have remained lurking about?"

"I doubt it. Besides, as I said, he had absolutely no motive for my father's murder."

I smiled grimly. "He had no motive of which we are as yet aware. Did the police come to any conclusion?"

"They gave Cyril and me a bad time, but neither of us confessed. I would say that the case is still open in their books."

I delicately put the question. "Do you sleep in a king-size or queen-size bed?"

"One of twin beds."

"Ah, and you say that you went to sleep immediately? Did your husband do the same when he came up?"

"How would I know that if I was asleep?"

She had a point there. However I pressed. "Actually either one of you could have been feigning sleep. One could have waited until the other fell asleep and then sneaked down to the boathouse, killed your father, and sneaked back to the bedroom with no one the wiser, except the victim."

She smiled faintly. "Have you considered that my husband could have *collaborated* on the murder?"

I shook my head. "No. If the two of you *had* collaborated, I'm

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certain you would have had the sense to provide each other with mutually substantiated alibis. No, the murder was committed by one person and the prime suspects are you, your husband, and this mysterious Helmuth McCarthy."

I pondered. A minute passed and then I sat up. "By Jove, I think I've got it."

"Got what?" Andrea asked.

"The alphabet *in itself* contains no message, but *of* itself it *is* the message."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Your father scratched the entire alphabet once—finishing with the period to indicate that he had said as much as was necessary—in order to show that he was physically capable of naming his murderer, but that he didn't think that it was *wise* to do so."

"In heaven's name, why not?"

I smiled tightly. "Because he knew that, in the course of things to come, the murderer *himself* would be the person who officially 'discovered' the body the next morning. And while playing the role of the 'discoverer' what would that murderer have done had he also found his name etched so accusingly on the planks of the boathouse?"

Andrea cooperated. "He would have destroyed the scratches somehow. He might even have burned down the boathouse to cover up his tracks."

"Exactly. But he did not burn down the boathouse or deface the scratchings. And why not? Because he saw no reason to believe that the alphabet threatened him in any way. Perhaps he even assumed that the letters were simply a kind of mindless hysterical reaction to approaching death. But what your father was actually telling us is that the person who 'discovered' the body is really the murderer."

I rubbed my hands. "Now, who 'discovered' the body?"

"I did," Andrea said.

Ralph took me out of earshot. "Henry, what the hell are you doing?"

"I thought it was obvious. I am solving a murder."

Ralph looked back to where Andrea sat staring thoughtfully into space. "Henry, we're *guests* here."

I was a bit shocked. "Ralph, what does that have to do with it?"

He tried another tack. "I mean, what real concrete *proof* do you have that she killed her father?"

"The proof will follow, Ralph. It lies there waiting to be deduced."

"Look, Henry, this isn't our turf. Why don't we just get us a good

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night's sleep, a nice breakfast tomorrow morning, and *then* when we leave, we can always drop in at the sheriff's office and tell him all about your deductions. After all, if this murder is four years old, what difference does one more night make anyway? Relax. Enjoy."

Ralph led me back to our chairs.

He chuckled pointedly. "So you carried that oar over your shoulder?"

I roused myself. "Yes. Outdoors it wasn't really too difficult, Ralph, but I had a perfect class-attendance record and I wasn't going to spoil that just because I was carrying an oar. The really tricky part was going up and down winding stairways. It took quite some maneuvering, I tell you."

"And nobody asked you why you were carrying that damn oar? Not even the professors?"

"Nobody, Ralph. Nobody. Anyway it all ended at two thirty in the afternoon when the campus police arrested me."

"What for? Disorderly conduct?"

"No. For stealing an oar. They took me to the Dean of Men. He was in really quite a good mood and he told me that he'd let me off this time if I'd just write 'I will never steal a sculling oar again' five thousand times. It took me the whole weekend because I have a slow handwriting, and I missed the state convention of the Crossword Puzzleteers which was being held in Sheboygan that year."

I studied Andrea keenly. "Is your husband home?"

She came out of her reverie. "No."

"Where is he?"

"Dead and buried."

I waited.

"One evening about a month after Dad was murdered, Cyril tumbled off the precipice. The police came to the conclusion that he must have accidentally slipped while taking a stroll in the moonlight."

I raised a questioning eyebrow. "And where were *you* when this accident occurred?"

"Inside the house playing Monopoly with Helmuth."

"Helmuth McCarthy?"

"The very same. The three of us began the game, but my husband made some bad investments and lost everything he had. He went for a walk while Helmuth and I continued to battle it out. Eventually I won. When I noticed that Cyril hadn't come back from his walk, we went out looking for him and found his body down there at the foot of the cliff."

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Once again I smiled grimly. "And I suppose that during this Monopoly shootout, neither you nor Helmuth left the board for any reason? I'd like to have a word with Helmuth McCarthy."

"You can't."

"Why not?"

"He's dead."

I blinked. "Him too?"

"Yes. An airplane accident." She smiled and changed the subject. "It's really a beautiful night. Why don't just you and I take a little stroll around the grounds?"

I balked. "Not near any damn precipice."

"We'll take the stairs down to the beach. Can you swim?"

"Like an otter."

"I'll show you the alphabet. It's still there."

I yielded to the temptation and rose. "Ralph, I want you to bear witness that when I left here, I was alive."

Andrea and I traversed about twenty yards of the back lawn before I said, "On the other hand, if *I* had been the murderer and 'discovered' the body and the alphabet, I would have realized instantly that an attempt had been made to convey *some* kind of message. Even if I couldn't decipher the message, perhaps someone *else* could and that would prove my undoing. Therefore, just to be on the safe side I would have burned down the boathouse. But you didn't. Why not?"

We walked a bit more before she spoke. "You didn't ask me what time I discovered the body."

"What time did you discover the body?"

"At a little after 3:30 A.M."

I mused on that. "3:30 A.M.? That seems like a rather odd time of the day to discover a body. Why were you up at that hour?"

"Because that's when the alarm clock rang."

"At 3:30 A.M.?"

"Yes. My husband and my father had made an arrangement to go out onto the lake to fish for Coho in the morning. Actually my husband wasn't all that keen about fishing, but he was just trying to butter up Dad. They were going to get up before dawn, meet in the boathouse, and Dad would take the boat out so that they could be at the right spot when the sun rose.

"When the alarm went off at 3:30 A.M., Cyril got up and went to the bathroom for his shower. He always showered before starting the day, no matter what the time. And I, when I'm awakened in the middle of the night, always find it difficult to get back to sleep. So

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this time, while Cyril was in the bathroom, I got up and dressed. I decided that I might as well see Cyril and Father off onto the lake and maybe even join them. I walked down to the boathouse, found it lit up, and discovered the body."

"Hm," I said, reaching a conclusion. "I see it all now. In the previous evening, after you went upstairs to bed, your husband finished his drink and the sports page and then decided to stroll down to the boathouse to speak to your father privately. Did he have murder in mind? I doubt it, since a premeditated murder would have been more safely planned. No, he went to the boathouse to talk. Perhaps to borrow money or to renegotiate the monetary aspects of your marriage.

"Your father proved stubborn, perhaps abusive, and words were exchanged. Your husband, losing his temper, picked up the nearest weapon, which happened to be the fish fillet knife, and struck. Then, realizing that his only chance to get away with the killing was simply to go back to the house and try to bluff it through, he went to bed and set the alarm to ring at 3:30 A.M. Perhaps he even slept.

"When the alarm rang, he pursued the routine course expected of him and went to the bathroom to shower, after which he intended to go down to the boathouse and 'innocently discover' the body, proving my theory about the message on the boathouse floor—that whoever 'discovered' the body is really the murderer. What he didn't anticipate was that this particular morning you would decide to get up and go down to the boathouse while he was taking his shower."

I now speculated. "This accurately accounts for your father's death, but what of your husband's? Do you still maintain that it was an accident, or did you solve the message of the alphabet and decide to take justice into your own hands? On the night of Cyril's death, didn't you excuse yourself from the Monopoly board on the pretext that you had a headache and wanted to go upstairs for some aspirins, but instead sneaked out of the house and expertly nudged your husband over the cliff?"

"Not exactly," Andrea said. "In the first place I didn't have the faintest idea what the alphabet meant until you told me a few minutes ago. Which means that I never really did suspect my husband of killing Father. I didn't think he was capable of murder. I thought that it must have been some intruder who had been caught in the act of stealing something from the boathouse.

"And as for the night of my husband's death I did once excuse myself from the Monopoly game—though not because of a headache.

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However, while I was upstairs in my bathroom, Helmuth McCarthy took that opportunity to go outside and push Cyril off the cliff."

I stared at her. "How do you know that's what happened?"

"Because Helmuth told me."

"Good heavens, woman. Why didn't you take that information to the police?"

"Because Helmuth didn't tell me until he was dying and by then it was too late to do anything and it wouldn't have made any difference except to cause harm to Helmuth's memory and his parents."

She elucidated. "Helmuth's light plane crashed while taking off from our local airport. It rammed into the underside of an executive jet that was just landing. The jet landed safely, but Helmuth didn't. He was rushed to the hospital still alive, but it was obvious—even to Helmuth—that he wasn't going to make it. So he asked to see me and he told me what he'd done."

"What motive could he have had for killing your husband?"

"One of the oldest. He figured that with Cyril gone, I was bound to marry him next." She sighed. "If you absolutely insist on having witnesses to his confession, you might consult his parents. They were there at the bedside. But I really don't see any point in making all this public now, do you? Everybody concerned seems to be dead. Why don't you just quietly file this case away in your memory file?"

I reflected morosely that my memory file was chockful of cases like that. Oh, well, perhaps there was room for one more.

We took the wooden stairs down to the base of the bluff.

"So nobody at all asked you why you were carrying that oar?"

"Nobody."

"You mean that even after all these years you still don't know that the whole campus had been—" She stopped.

"Been what?"

"Never mind. I just don't have the heart to tell you."

I sighed. "Somehow old Charley got hold of all those sentences I'd written for the dean and he used them to paper two walls of his dorm room. Then he asked me if I would write 'I will never steal a sculling oar again' five thousand times more so that he could paper the other two walls."

She stared at me. "My God, you *didn't?*"

"No. I still don't quite understand it, but something snapped and I knocked out four of Charley's front teeth. He never did speak to me again and he even redecorated his room."

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It was really quite a beautiful evening and we walked out to the end of the pier to study the stars.

Andrea informed me that there were just dozens of local murders waiting for someone to solve them and finally I promised to come back the next weekend, even if Ralph couldn't make it.

When Andrea and I got back to the house, we found Ralph inside watching television.

He took me aside. "Nine bathrooms, and I didn't even get up to the servants' quarters."

The maid brought him another bottle of beer, and me a glass of sherry.

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a *NEW* Nick Velvet story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Remember the picture postcards we used to buy—the old penny postcards? Some were in flat black-and-white with fancy decorative borders. Others had a textured surface and were printed in garish colors. Well, there are no penny postcards any more. You're lucky to find any at ten cents apiece. Then why on earth would someone hire Nick Velvet, the unique thief who steals only the worthless, only objects without value, to pilfer some cheap, run-of-the-mill postcards and be willing to pay $25,000 for them? . . . In the Nick Velvet stories wonders never cease . . .

THE THEFT OF THE PICTURE POSTCARDS

by EDWARD D. HOCH

His name was Otis Fahrenheit, and he smiled when he introduced himself to Nick Velvet.

"Like the thermometer?" Nick asked.

"Exactly like the thermometer, Mr. Velvet," the man replied. He looked like a slightly thinner version of Sidney Greenstreet, in the roles he used to play in the old Bogart films that Nick watched on late-night TV. "I want you to steal some picture postcards for me."

"If they're messages being used for blackmail—"

"There are no messages, Mr. Velvet. I'm talking about blank picture postcards, as they are sold in stores."

"I see."

"I want you to steal some from a little general store in Spotted Lake, Vermont."

"How many do you want?"

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"As many as they have showing the lake itself. I believe there's only one view, and I doubt if they'll have more than a dozen in stock."

"You realize my fee is twenty-five thousand dollars," Nick said, shifting in his chair. "That's pretty high for a dozen penny postcards."

The big man chuckled. Nick wondered if he practised it in front of a mirror. "Postcards haven't sold for a penny in decades, Mr. Velvet. They're more likely to be ten cents apiece these days, though in Spotted Lake you may still find them three for a quarter."

"Still—"

"The assignment may be more difficult than you imagine," Fahrenheit warned him.

Nick had promised Gloria he'd take her along on his next assignment, but she'd gone off to visit her ailing mother in Florida, so he made the drive up to Vermont alone. It was a clear cool day in early autumn, with brown and gold just beginning to appear among the leaves of distant trees. The town of Spotted Lake was a little larger than he'd expected, apparently due to a small knitting mill that employed a hundred or so people.

Nick drove past the mill and along the lake itself for a short distance before reaching the general store at a crossroads in the center of town. He parked his car out front, having no reason for caution, and went inside. A middle-aged woman in a flowered apron was sweeping the faded linoleum floor. She glanced up, gave him a perfunctory smile, and continued with her work. There seemed to be no other customers.

"Do you have any picture postcards of the area?" Nick asked.

She studied him more closely now. "Have any special views in mind?"

"I don't know—the lake, maybe. It sure is pretty."

"Used to be a good deal prettier." She leaned on the broom. "What postcards we got are over there in the rack. Three for a quarter."

Nick tried to act casual as he scanned the wire counter rack. The views were full-color photographs now, printed with a glossy finish—not the flat black-and-white or the textured, garishly colored scenes he remembered from his youth. It had been years since he'd bought a postcard. Most of the selection showed views of nearby cities or Vermont mountaintops. There was only a single card showing Spotted Lake, lone in its wire pocket.

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"Got any more of these?" Nick asked the woman.

"Is that what you're after? You come all the way up from New York like those other men?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"That photo's the only one we have of the lake, at least on a postcard. Matt Sadler took it maybe twenty years ago. He printed up the cards himself, and now I've got the only ones left. All of a sudden there's a big demand for them."

"Can't he print more?"

She shook her head. "His studio was in his home. It burned down last month, destroyed all his old negatives. And a stranger's been coming around buying up what postcards there are. After the fire, when I knew Matt couldn't print any more, I took most of them out of the rack and put them behind the counter. It's one to a customer now."

Nick squinted at the postcard, seeing nothing unusual about the picture. It had been taken from across the lake and by looking closely he could see a few buildings—houses, stores, and the mill at the far right. But there were no people or vehicles in evidence, and not even a boat on the calm lake waters.

"But you do have some more of these?" Nick asked again.

"Sure, about a dozen more, but I'm keeping them."

For the first time Nick saw a large, mean-looking German shepherd stroll from behind the counter. This must have been the difficulty Fahrenheit had in mind. In a flash of inspiration Nick reached into his jacket pocket for the tiny tape recorder he often carried. He pressed the RECORD button and said, "I'm willing to pay more than three for a quarter. How about a dollar each?"

"Sorry. You can buy one, that's all."

He picked two other views of the Green Mountains and paid her a quarter. As she rang up the sale he moved to a position halfway behind the counter, hoping for a glimpse of the other postcards. Almost at once there was a snarl from the German shepherd and it fastened its jaws over Nick's wrist.

"For God's sake, call off your hound!"

"He'd tear your arm off if I said so."

"Suppose you say something else to him, like telling him to let me go?"

"Off, King!" she commanded, and the dog freed him.

Nick rubbed his wrist and gazed at the woman with new respect. She was plain in appearance, a trifle overweight, but with something

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alive in her eyes that he hadn't noticed before. "No one would try to rob you with that dog around, Mrs.—"

"Amanda Greg's the name. And I'm not married. If I had a husband around I wouldn't need King."

"Well, it was nice meeting you and King, Miss Greg." He started for the door and then paused, as if with a sudden thought. "If I wanted some pictures taken, where might I find this Matt Sadler?"

"Since the fire he's been living in a cottage down by the lake. Turn down the Lake Road and look for his name on the sign."

Nick followed her directions without any real plan in mind. Mainly he was curious about the fire, and about how far Otis Fahrenheit would go to steal or destroy the picture postcards of Spotted Lake. The road to the cottages went steeply downhill and then forked to the left and right at the bottom. A signpost with names and arrows directed him to the left, and he found the Sadler cottage near the end of the road. It was a low wooden building, smaller and newer than most of the others. When no one answered his knock he walked around to the lake side and saw a man fishing off the end of a short pier.

"Hello there," Nick called out. "I'm looking for Matt Sadler."

"You found him," the man said. He was about sixty, with gray hair and a motheaten beard. "What can I do for you?"

Nick walked out on the pier and sat down next to the man, letting his legs dangle over the edge. "I may want some pictures of this area and somebody told me you were a pretty good photographer."

"Used to be," the gray-haired man said. "Got burned out a month ago and lost everything—all my cameras, equipment, everything. I'm just wastin' my days fishing till the insurance check comes through and I can buy some new cameras."

"That's too bad," Nick sympathized. "I bought these postcards up at the general store and the woman there told me you took some of the pictures."

He glanced at the cards in Nick's hand. "That Spotted Lake one is mine. I must have taken it twenty years ago. Printed it up myself and sold a flock of them to the stores around here."

"It's a good view. Taken from across the lake, wasn't it?"

Matt Sadler nodded. "From on top that bluff. Great view from up there."

"I'll bet you made a lot of money off this."

He shrugged. "It was just another picture. I used to have some great shots of the mountains, but they all burned up in the fire."

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"That's too bad. What caused it?"

"Arson, that's what! Somebody broke in and sprinkled gasoline around while I was away one night. The police think it was robbers who were trying to cover up their crime."

"I suppose your old negatives were destroyed too—like the one for this picture?"

"Everything. Funny thing, they tell me there's been a big demand for that postcard lately. Most stores are sold out. When I get my new equipment I'll take a new photo and print up some replacements."

Nick studied the postcard again. "Odd there'd be such a demand, especially if the picture is twenty years old. Has anything changed on the scene to make this valuable?"

"Nothing. I could take a picture from the bluff today and it would look almost identical. The trees are a little bigger, of course, but there's been no new building to speak of on this side of the lake."

Nick noticed a slim vertical orange line rising from the lake on the right side of the photo and he wondered if it was a printing error. Otherwise nothing seemed out of place in the scene. "Odd there were no boats on the lake."

"I shot it on a weekday morning in September. Most of the summer people had gone and the weather was too cool for the locals."

"You've got a good memory."

"I remember my pictures."

"Any idea who'd want to rob or burn your place?"

He took out a pipe and began to fill it from a pouch of tobacco. "You ask questions like a detective."

"I'm not," Nick told him with a laugh.

"Well, there's a writer living up in the hills who's been causing me some grief lately. Can't imagine him burning the place down, though. We just feud about me not supporting his liberal causes."

"What's his name?"

"Tim Larking. He writes outdoor articles—hunting and fishing things. Though I swear he's even turning against hunting lately."

"Speaking of fishing, it doesn't look as if you're catching anything."

Sadler began reeling in his line. "The damn lake is dead. I doubt if there's a living fish in it any more. Larking's right about that much."

Nick got to his feet, brushing off the seat of his trousers. "It's been a pleasure talking to you, Mr. Sadler. I hope that insurance money comes through so you'll be back in business soon."

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"Can't be too soon for me. This enforced vacation's getting me down!"

Nick walked back to his car and sat looking at the postcard again. Otis Fahrenheit's motives shouldn't concern him. He should do the job without a second thought. And yet— He turned the card over and studied the other side. A box in the upper right stated *Place Stamp Here,* and a vertical line of type down the center of the card read *Photo by Matt Sadler, Spotted Lake, Vermont. Printed in U.S.A.* Perhaps Sadler had stolen the photo from someone. But so what? Postcard photos like this one certainly had no great value.

Except to Otis Fahrenheit, he reminded himself.

Nick started the car and drove up the steep hill to the highway. Amanda Greg and King were on the front steps of the general store as he went by. He waved and kept on going. He'd be back after dark, and in the meantime—since he had a few hours to kill anyway—he just might look up that outdoor writer, Tim Larking.

The town's slim telephone book gave Larking's address as a number on Mountain Lane, and Nick found it without much trouble. The dwelling was an elaborate log house that seemed rustic only when viewed from a distance. As he walked up to the door Nick could observe the careful and expensive workmanship that had gone into its construction. Outdoor writing apparently had been quite profitable for Larking.

A young yellow-haired woman answered the door. She was wearing cut-off jeans and a man's white T-shirt that did little to hide her figure. "We don't need any aluminum siding," she said immediately.

"Do I look like an aluminum-siding salesman?" Nick asked with a grin.

"You'd be surprised what we get up here."

"I'd like to speak to Tim Larking if he's available."

"He's working. Doesn't like to be disturbed."

"Are you Mrs. Larking?"

"Close enough."

"I'm doing some research on Spotted Lake and I thought—"

"Who is it, Ginny?" a gruff male voice called from inside.

She turned her head and said, "Some man wants to see you about the lake. I told him you were busy."

Tim Larking appeared at her shoulder. He was a large red-bearded man who would have looked good in a lumberman's jacket wielding an ax. "What can I do for you, Mister?" he asked.

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"Nick Velvet's the name. I'm researching the lakes in this area for a summer camp I'm thinking of establishing. Someone told me you were the local expert on Spotted Lake."

The red-bearded man stepped aside. "Come on in, Mr. Velvet. I'm the man you're looking for."

The young woman, Ginny, seemed disturbed by Larking's acceptance of Nick. "You be careful, Tim," she warned. "I still think he looks like a door-to-door salesman!"

"Yeah, yeah! Get us a couple beers, will you, Gin?" He flopped down in an oversized chair covered with imitation zebra skin. "She gets upset when something takes me away from the typewriter. Me, I look for excuses! Now what can I do for you?"

"As I was saying—"

"Oh, sure, Spotted Lake. Know how it got its name? When the early settlers in this area first arrived it had clumps of vegetation growing just beneath the water's surface. They were scattered here and there around the lake, giving it a spotted appearance when seen from the bluffs."

"Interesting."

"Damn thing's polluted now, like most of our lakes."

"I saw Matt Sadler fishing in it today."

"Sadler's an optimist. If he pulls a dead cat out of that lake he'll be lucky. He's sittin' on his butt waiting for the insurance company to pay off on a fire he probably set himself."

"Why do you say that?"

Ginny entered with the beers. Nick noticed she'd brought a third one for herself. "You could get in trouble saying things like that, Tim," she said. "How do you know who this man is?"

Larking merely smiled. "He sure isn't a siding salesman! I'd pick him for a game warden myself."

"Not guilty," Nick assured him. "Now you were saying about the fire—?"

"The fire. Yeah. It sure was arson, but who in hell would have it in for Matt Sadler? He's sort of a sad old guy, really, trundling around the countryside with his cameras and equipment. I'm not surprised he's trying to fish in Spotted Lake.

"So because no one else would burn down his house he must have done it himself?"

"That's what I figure. Unless his ex-wife did it, of course."

"You stop that now, Tim!" Ginny yelled at him. She was really

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upset now. "I'll swear the way your mind works you should be writing for those TV soap operas instead of for outdoor magazines."

"Who's his ex-wife?" Nick asked casually.

"Amanda Greg down at the general store. You probably drove by it."

"I stopped there, in fact."

"She's a good sort. Tough as a man, especially if that dog of hers is around. I can see why they never got on."

Nick sipped his beer. "Maybe Sadler got a picture of something that somebody didn't like. Maybe that's why they burned down his place."

"Sadler wouldn't have the guts to blackmail anyone."

"I don't mean blackmail. Maybe he didn't know himself what he had." Nick took the postcard from his pocket. "This is one of his photos of the lake, isn't it?"

Larking gave it a passing glance. "Sure. That's the one."

"Anything unusual about it?"

"Not that I know of. It's been around twenty years."

"It's just a picture of the lake," Ginny agreed.

Nick tried to get back in character. "So you say the lake is dead? No good for swimming and camping activities?"

"That's right. I've been writing and lecturing about it for years and people are finally beginning to listen. We've actually had kids get sick from swimming in it."

"Then I guess it wouldn't be the place for me," Nick agreed.

Ginny finished her beer. "This isn't the place for you either, Mr. Velvet. Tim has work to do and you're keeping him from it."

"All right," he said. "I'll be going."

Larking walked him to the door. "How'd you hear about Spotted Lake in the first place?"

Nick decided to take a chance. "Man named Otis Fahrenheit mentioned it."

The bearded man nodded. "He used to own the knitting mill here. Sold it a long time ago and moved on to bigger things."

Nick shook hands with him at the door. "Thanks for your help. I guess I look elsewhere for a campsite." As he went out to the car he noticed Ginny still watching him from the window.

He waited until well after dark and then drove back to the center of town. Parking his car in the shadow of some trees, Nick went the rest of the way on foot to Amanda Greg's general store. The lock on

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the side door was easily picked and he entered without difficulty. But almost at once he heard a low growl from King. As he'd feared, the dog slept in the store at night.

Nick left his pocket tape recorder on a shelf near the door, switched it to PLAY, and hurried across the store to the counter where the extra postcards were probably kept. Almost at once the dog was on him, fastening its jaws on his wrist.

"Off, King!" Amanda Greg's voice came from the other side of the store. The dog hesitated and the voice came again. "Off, King!" It relaxed its jaws and Nick pulled his hand free.

Almost at once he found the postcards, in a drawer next to the cash register. The loop of tape he'd fashioned was still repeating its message at five-second intervals. "Off, King!" The dog stood uncertainly in the darkness, obeying its master's voice.

Nick checked the postcards with his flashlight, looked around to make sure he wasn't overlooking any, and then made for the side door. He pocketed the tape recorder just as it said "Off, King!" one more time.

There were eleven postcards of Spotted Lake, and he delivered them to Otis Fahrenheit the following day in New York. The man thundered his approval in the best movie-villain tradition. "Excellent, excellent, Mr. Velvet! You are truly a miracle worker!"

"It wasn't difficult," Nick said.

"I had a man come back from there with teeth marks all the way up his arm."

"Maybe he wasn't a pet lover like I am."

Fahrenheit tossed a thick envelope on the desk. "The balance of your twenty-five thousand, Mr. Velvet. It's been a pleasure doing business with you."

Nick mailed one of the Green Mountain postcards to Gloria in Florida and tossed the other in the wastebasket that evening. As far as he was concerned, the picture-postcard caper was over.

Gloria phoned from Florida two days later to say she was coming home. Her mother was better and she'd be flying to New York that evening. Nick had just hung up the phone when the doorbell rang. The man on the porch was tall and slender, wearing a sports jacket with a shirt and tie that didn't quite match. Nick thought with a smile that he looked like an aluminum-siding salesman.

"Fahrenheit wants to see you," the man said simply.

"My business with him is finished."

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The man stepped into the doorway and Nick felt the barrel of a pistol pressed against his stomach. "No, it isn't. Come along with me."

Within forty-five minutes he was back in the New York office of Otis Fahrenheit. "I'm disappointed in you, Mr. Velvet," the big man told him. "You failed in your mission."

"That's impossible."

"Is it?" Fahrenheit's face contorted with anger. "Look at this—it came in the morning mail!"

Nick picked up the envelope on his desk and looked inside. There were two glossy prints of the Spotted Lake photograph on thin paper. They were not postcards and seemed to have been printed from the original color negative. A crudely printed message was with them: *The last man you sent failed again. The price is still one million dollars for the remaining postcards and prints.* It was dated the day after Nick's visit to Spotted Lake.

"Blackmail," he said quietly, trying to remember where he'd first heard the word spoken in connection with this Spotted Lake business. Had to have been Tim Larking or Ginny, or was it before that?

"Yes, blackmail, Mr. Velvet. But that needn't concern you. Your concern is your failure to accomplish your mission."

"You hired me to steal postcards and I stole them. You said nothing about photographs."

He turned to the man who'd brought Nick. "We have to go up there again, Rubin." The man nodded.

"Is Rubin the one with the teeth marks on his arm?" Nick asked. Otis Fahrenheit nodded. "And the one who burned down Matt Sadler's house and studio?"

"You know too much," the man named Rubin said.

Otis Fahrenheit growled, "Shut up, Rubin!" Then, "You guessed correctly, Mr. Velvet. The blackmail attempt began nearly two months ago. Rubin bought up all the postcards he could find but these letters kept coming. Next he took some action at the photographer's studio, since the cards were being printed there. Still the threats continued to come. He attempted to steal the remaining postcards from Amanda Greg's store, and was bitten by her dog. That's when I decided to hire you. It seemed a natural for your strange talents—a valueless object which has great value to me."

"Why?" Nick asked. "What's on that picture that could possibly be worth a million dollars? There aren't even any people or cars or boats visible."

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"I may have to pay a million dollars to keep that secret, Mr. Velvet. I certainly don't intend to tell it to you."

"What are you going to do now?"

Fahrenheit glanced at Rubin. "We're going back to Spotted Lake, and you're coming along, Mr. Velvet."

"I don't think I can break away right now."

"We think you can."

"Maybe next week—"

"Next week will be too late. The matter must be resolved now. I have a court appearance on Monday."

Nick glanced at the nervous Rubin, who seemed to be fingering the gun in his pocket. There seemed no way out of it without a great deal of unpleasantness. "All right, I'll come with you."

"Very good, Mr. Velvet."

"Any idea who the blackmailer is?"

"None whatsoever. But it appears to be someone who knew you were up there. How many people did you see?"

"Just three—no, four—altogether. Amanda Greg and Matt Sadler, and a writer named Tim Larking and his girl Ginny."

Fahrenheit nodded. "I used to know Amanda and Matt quite well, when they were married. And Larking, of course. I don't know Ginny."

"You had the mill up there."

"That was in another lifetime, Mr. Velvet. Today I own a fleet of oil tankers, and chemical plants in three countries."

"How can you tear yourself away?"

"This shouldn't take long. With the blackmailer narrowed to four people Rubin can identify the guilty one."

"With his gun?"

"If necessary."

"The first thing I'm going to do," Rubin confided on the way to the car, "is to shoot that damned dog."

This time they flew up to Spotted Lake, in a little corporate jet with the name of Fahrenheit's company stenciled on the side. A rented car waited at the airport to take them the final twenty miles of their journey. Much of the trip had been made in silence but now as they approached their destination in the late afternoon Otis Fahrenheit found time to reminisce.

"This was the first business I ever owned," he told Nick. "I bought the mill when it was ready to close and kept it going for ten years.

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By the time I sold it and moved to New York it was a thriving enterprise. The town should put up a statue to me instead of trying to blackmail me!"

"I hardly think the whole town's responsible," Nick remarked.

"I wouldn't be too sure."

They pulled up in front of the general store, and Nick saw Tim Larking and Ginny just coming out. Larking and Fahrenheit faced each other, equally surprised by the unexpected encounter. "I shouldn't have thought you'd have the nerve to ever show your face up here," the bearded writer told him.

"I have nothing to be ashamed of," Fahrenheit replied.

Ginny's eyes were on Nick. "It's that siding salesman again! He's one of Fahrenheit's people, just like you thought!"

"Not really," Nick murmured. "Let's all go inside."

"What is this?" Larking wanted to know.

Rubin nudged him with a bulging pocket. "You heard the man—back inside!"

Amanda Greg strode out from behind her counter. "Well, Otis, I see you've brought your hired guns with you this time."

"Still the same old Amanda, after my scalp as usual."

"Maybe this time I'll get it. This one," she indicated Rubin, "almost had his arm chewed off last time."

Fahrenheit glanced around. "Where's that ex-husband of yours?"

"Matt? You'd hardly expect to find him here."

"Phone him. Tell him to come here."

"Why should I?" she challenged.

"I know one of you is trying to blackmail me, and I'm going to find out who!"

She tried staring him down, but in the end she went to the phone and called Sadler at his cottage. He promised he'd be right over. While they waited, a woman and her child came to the door, but Amanda shooed them off. "Closed for inventory," she told them. "Come back in the morning."

They waited in near-silence for ten minutes before Matt Sadler arrived. "Hello, Tim," he said. "What are you doing here?"

"I don't exactly know. This seems to be a command performance. Ginny and I were leaving when Otis arrived with his gunmen."

"I have no gun," Nick insisted. "And before we get carried away I want to say I'm here under protest too."

Fahrenheit turned to Rubin. "Keep an eye on them. Don't let anyone leave till I finish talking." He let his eyes pass over them

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and then said, "One of you four has been trying to blackmail me, mailing me those old postcards with the picture of Spotted Lake. None of you is leaving here until the blackmailer is identified."

"Why would anyone blackmail you?" Ginny asked. She was the youngest of them, and perhaps she didn't have the knowledge the others had. Then suddenly Nick remembered the postcard and smiled. He knew what the blackmailer knew, and it was important that everyone knew. Otis Fahrenheit might kill one person, but it wasn't likely he'd be able to kill five of them.

"Do you want to tell them," Nick asked, "or should I?"

Fahrenheit turned his hard eyes on Nick. "What do you know?"

"I know you hired me to steal the last of those postcards, and I know why. Because in a moment of pure chance twenty years ago Matt Sadler took his photograph while your knitting mill was in the act of polluting Spotted Lake."

"Of course!" Sadler said, as if it was all clear to him at last. "And you burned down my studio to destroy that negative!"

"You've all seen the picture," Nick hurried on, before the big man could interrupt. "There's a vertical orange line on the right side that I took to be rising from the lake. But it was really a thin stream of chemical dye flowing *into* the lake from the mill, which was also on the right side of the photograph. Even today there's probably evidence of an old discharge pipe, if you know where to look."

Tim Larking nodded, grim-faced. "He killed the lake. That's when the pollution started, all those years ago. And the evidence of it, the proof of it, was right on those postcards."

"It happened so long ago," Amanda Greg said. "Why would the information be worth a million dollars today?"

"Because Otis Fahrenheit has to be in court next week. I strongly suspect it involves a lawsuit over pollution, either from his oil tankers or his chemical plants. It wouldn't be too good for his image if evidence proved he polluted a lovely lake twenty years ago."

Rubin turned toward his boss. "What should I do with them?"

"You'll do nothing with us," Amanda Greg said. "Your secret is out now, for the whole world to know."

Fahrenheit crooked a finger toward Rubin. "Take her first."

Amanda raised her voice just a trifle. "Come, King!" There was a movement from behind the counter and the big German shepherd appeared.

Rubin took one look at the dog and went for his gun. As the weapon cleared his pocket Nick reached behind him to a display of decorated

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breadboards and brought one down hard on the man's head. Rubin stiffened and went down.

Otis Fahrenheit made a move for the fallen gun but Nick stopped him. "Hold on! I just did you a big favor." He nudged Rubin's unconscious body with his foot. "This man's your blackmailer."

"Rubin? I don't believe you!"

"You'd better believe! The reason you could never recover the last of those postcards was that Rubin kept holding out on you after his trips up here. And before he burned down Sadler's studio he searched the files and stole the negative of that picture. Who was in a better position to know your concern about that court appearance? He found out about the Spotted Lake pollution and decided it was a perfect time to shake you down. The man's a criminal, Fahrenheit! Isn't it more likely he'd try to blackmail you than one of these people?"

Otis Fahrenheit was silent for a moment, thinking it through. Then he said, very quietly, "I suppose I should have known it from the start. He was always after more money."

"What'll we do with him?" the red-bearded Larking asked.

"What do you say, Fahrenheit? Should we turn him over to the local police on the arson charge or will you take care of him?" When the big man didn't answer Nick suggested, "Let's load him in the car." They all agreed, and Nick helped Larking and Sadler carry the unconscious Rubin out of the store.

"There won't be any more blackmail," Nick promised Fahrenheit at the car, "but you'll have to take your chances in the courtroom. You know this pollution story can't be swept under the rug any more, now that several people know it."

"That damned Larking will do a magazine article on it," Fahrenheit grumbled. "Aren't you flying back with us?"

Nick shook his head. "I'm staying here for a day or so. I'll get back on my own. Be careful of Rubin. He'll be furious when he comes to."

"Don't worry. I never trusted the man anyway."

Nick watched the car drive away and then went back inside. Amanda Greg was standing near the door. "That was clever of you."

Nick shrugged. "It seemed like a good way out for everyone."

"You know Rubin wasn't really the blackmailer."

He smiled at her. "Of course not, Amanda. You were."

Matt Sadler had taken some cold beer from the store's cooler and the three of them were sitting on the steps while Nick and Amanda

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talked inside. "I was going to use the million dollars to help clean up Spotted Lake and restock it with fish," she said. "The state hasn't done much for us."

"Don't worry," Nick advised her. "It'll get done. If I know Tim Larking he'll be writing about this, and the publicity might even force Otis Fahrenheit to contribute a large sum of money. The important thing is that your blackmail scheme has to end now. No more letters, no more threats—understand?"

"Yes," she said with a sigh.

"It won't take Fahrenheit long to realize those blackmail letters were mailed from Spotted Lake and Rubin couldn't have done it after all. But as long as there are no more letters he'll have to suspect his man was somehow involved."

"How did you know it was me?"

"The latest mailing seemed to be photo prints made from the original negative. That focused in on Matt, who had the negative in his possession before the fire, or you. As his former wife you might have taken the negative from his files long before Rubin burned down the house. The other day you told me you removed the postcards from the rack after the fire, because you knew you couldn't get any more. But Rubin's first action was to buy up all the cards from all these stores. It was later, after the blackmail threats kept coming, that he burned Sadler's studio to destroy the negative he couldn't find. If you'd told the truth, your cards would have been all sold out before the fire."

"That's circumstantial, and pretty weak. I could have had a package in the storeroom that I'd forgotten about."

Nick shook his head. "No, there was a clincher. Just now, when we were talking to Fahrenheit, you asked why the blackmail information would be worth a million dollars. Otis only said he was being blackmailed—he never mentioned the amount. You could have known that only if you wrote the letters."

"All right," she said, turning away. "I told you I was doing it for a good cause. What more can I say?"

"And you'll stop now?"

She nodded. "The secret is out, as you said. I should have known you were a clever man when you managed to steal the postcards from the drawer with King on guard. Tell me one thing—how'd you do it without drugging him?"

Nick only smiled. "That's my secret. Besides, I want to join the others before the beer is all gone."

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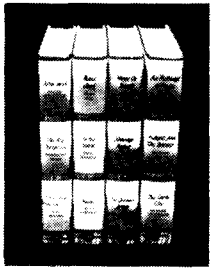

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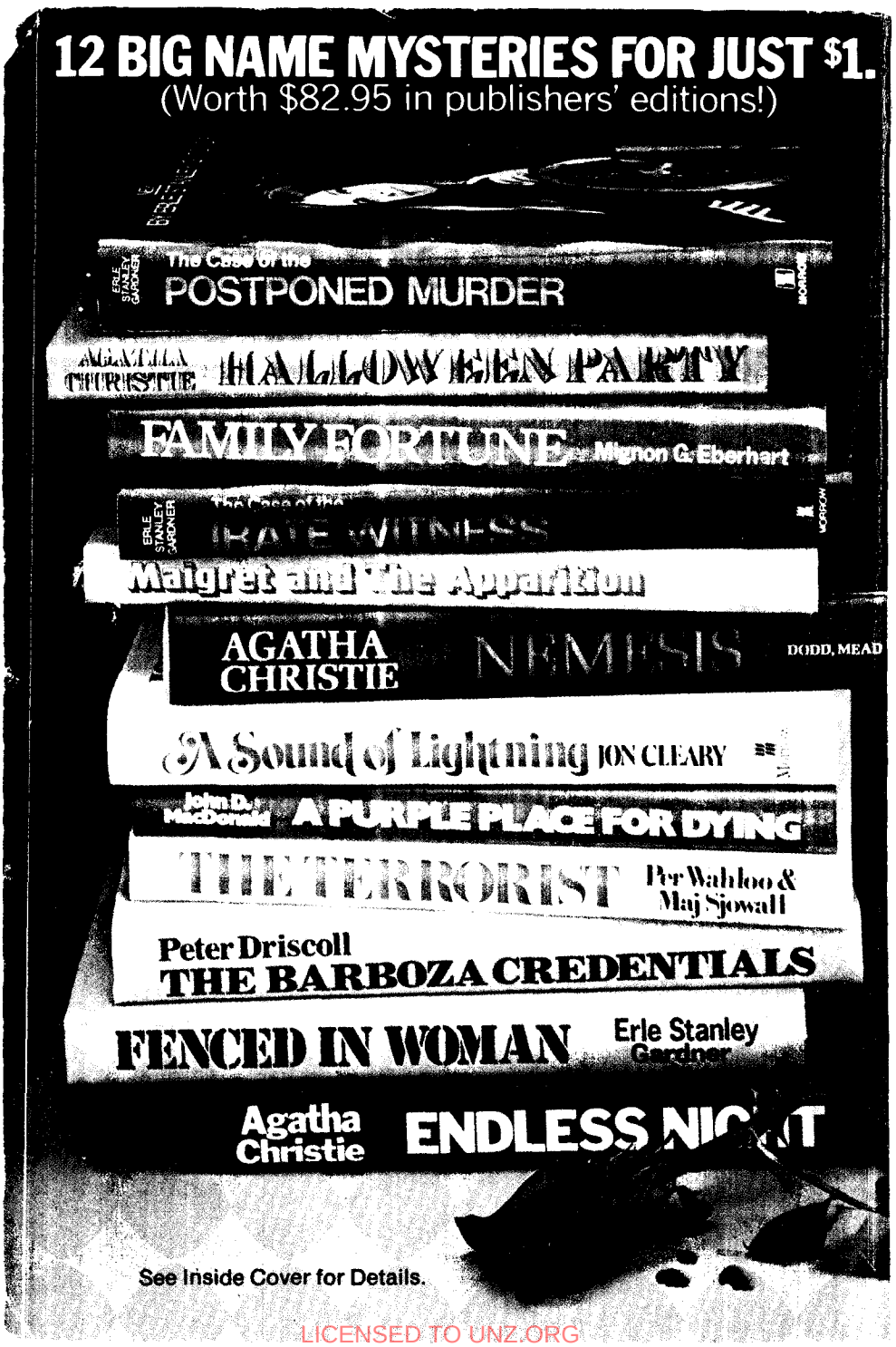

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